

Kali Devi

# PICTURING THE GODDESS:

# BAZAAR IMAGES AND THE IMAGINATION OF MODERN HINDU RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

By

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To my beloved husband, James

and

To Bhauji

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# INTRODUCTION

In this project, I consider the relationship between Indian bazaar art of the late colonial era and the formation of a modern, pan-Indian Hindu religious identity. I claim that the popular, mechanically reproduced lithographs of the modern mother goddess Bharat Mata deserve more attention than they have so far received from scholars of religion. While some scholars in other fields have written about these images from a political standpoint, I propose that we take seriously their religious genealogy and treat them as vernacular religious texts with something to tell us about late-colonial Hindu questions of *dharma*. I posit that these images offer an indigenous, insider narrative of a powerful and coherent Hinduism, in contradistinction to the outsider narratives of Hinduism as a form of paganism, or as nothing but a colonial construction.

In arguing for these images as sources of insight into the formation of a modern Hindu religious identity, I assume that there is such an entity as Hinduism, even though the definition and parameters of "Hinduism" remain the subject of academic debate. I do not attempt to define what Hinduism is; I treat it as something like Wendy Doniger's "implied spider" metaphor for religion, something whose existence can be inferred from the webs of meaning it weaves, whether or not the creator is evident. (Doniger 1998) I accept the indigenous claim that Hinduism as *sanatana dharma* ("ancient/eternal law") existed in some form long before European colonizers attempted to fit it into post-Enlightenment religious categories, and I endeavor to be sensitive to the irony that, as a Western academic, I have no choice but to discuss Hinduism in terms set by Western European discourse.

## Theory and Method

This project is necessarily interdisciplinary, and I draw on the received wisdom of several fields, including anthropology, the history of religion and art history. My theoretical approach presupposes Benedict Anderson's formulation of nation as an "imagined community" with the vernacular-language press as the vehicle of shared imagination. I apply Anderson's concept to the construction and articulation of an indigenous religious identity called "Hinduism." Where Anderson privileged the printed word as the medium which allowed people to imagine themselves as members of the same community, I shift perspective to consider mechanically reproduced deity images as a vehicle uniquely suited to India's polyvernacular and largely oral cultures precisely because their message does not depend on the viewer's literacy in a given language. Through the simultaneous viewing and devotional interaction with particular instances of the "same" image in multiple private spaces, it became possible for Indians of all regions and walks of life to envision themselves as a community based on shared practice.

My methodological approach is both mythological and phenomenological. It is influenced by Wendy Doniger's and Bruce Lincoln's approaches to myth as meaning-making narratives contextualized within a power differential. I draw on the work of Mircea Eliade, Annemarie Schimmel, Arvind Sharma and Gavin Flood in the phenomenology of religion.  My data are a set of lithographs, "mythopictures" of the goddess, for which I offer close readings to reveal an underlying structure of civilizational symbols and myths which constituted the fundamental cultural ground of Hinduism in the late nineteenth century. I define this ground and structure as religious, in

the sense of religion as the intentional relation between the believer and a transcendent dimension – "the sacred", in Eliade's terms - where "sacred" is phenomenologically understood as that category of objects construed in the mind of the believer as both ultimately real and other with respect to the profane/material world. I take the goddess images as meaningful in their own plane of reference, which requires that I attempt to engage them on their own terms. David Kinsley proposes that in order to study religious things as religious things,

> One must acquaint oneself with their context, one must be sensitive to the cultural setting of a given phenomenon…[This approach] demands an openness to a dimension of reality that may not be experienced by the interpreter in his own life. (Kinsley 1977: 5)

Mythology is not the privileged category that it once was in the study of religion, being too closely associated with the out-of-fashion idea of religion as *sui generis*. The contemporary academy generally discounts religion as a "special" category, and along with it the old view which limits myth to "sacred stories" somewhat akin to fairy tales. The association of "myth" with "nature spirits" is evident in Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough.* In this seminal, and still widely read, work on "comparative religion" Frazer sought parallels between Christian and pagan, or "primitive", myths to support his theory of primitive religion as distinct from evolved (i.e., monotheistic Christian) religion. Frazer's theory and method are long since discredited, but he contributed to the field an enduring impression that "myth" means stories about gods or spirits, and that such stories are universal or nearly so, with variants of one story cropping up all over the world and throughout history, although Frazer's world contained little of Africa or Asia.

The phenomenological approach to myth was developed by Mircea Eliade, who (unlike Frazer) devoted a good deal of fieldwork and study to Indian religions. Eliade

was convinced that religion is the experience of a metaphysical dimension ("the sacred") which underlies the physical and gives it, as it were, its reality.[1] Particular instances of the sacred are perceived as manifesting historically and temporally as hierophanies - "breakthroughs" of the sacred into the world, or, in Brian Rennie's definition, "any element of the experiential world of humanity which is perceived in such a way as to constitute a revelation of the sacred." (Rennie 1996:15). Such "breakthrough" points, in Indian culture, are known as *tirthas* ("fords"): physical locations where some spiritually extraordinary event has occurred, or where some spiritually extraordinary person received enlightenment, or died. Such places, such as the site of the Buddha's enlightenment, are objects of pilgrimage: by visiting them in the present, the devotee experiences a connection to the event of the mythic past. By holding both dimensions of awareness simultaneously in consciousness, the devotee effectively brings the past, or "eternal", event into the present, and by doing so, he experiences the present moment in terms of mythological reality. Sharma notes,

> The watchword of phenomenology is "To the things themselves (*Zu den Sachen*)" and its corollary is the radical suspension (*epoche*) of one's own values in order to describes the phenomenon in its own terms including hidden meanings, the less accessible layers of the phenomenon. (Sharma 1988)

By approaching the lithographs phenomenologically, I attempt to let them "speak for themselves". I adopt the view which, elsewhere, Sharma calls that of a "sympathetic outsider" by bracketing out my assumptions about their meaning, and attempt to look through them, as it were, to the underlying structure of myth and symbol which informs them.

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[1] In this, June McDaniel suggests, he may have been influenced by his study of Vedanta with Surendranath Dasgupta. (McDaniel 2003)

For Eliade, the function of myth is to help us to awaken to the presence of the sacred, to experience our present slice of apparently linear time as an aspect of eternity, and to rediscover the sacred-creative dimension of ordinary activity. Myth, for Eliade, is by definition transformative: it is a roadmap to the experience of re-connecting with the dimension from which our humanity draws its sustenance. Moreover, myth is an adaptive attitude towards the "terror of history":

> Adapted to a particular myth theory…catastrophes could not only be tolerated by their contemporaries but also *positively* accorded a value immediately after their appearance. (Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, 136; cited in Rennie 1996: 91)

I suggest that "god pictures" in general may be approached as *tirthas*, and their viewing as experiences of transformation, in which the viewer's consciousness expands to include awareness of a religious dimension to his ordinary sense of identity or community.  Moreover, I suggest that the goddess images which we will be examining are evidence of  the adaptation of an ongoing historical catastrophe – i.e., the experience of colonization – to a mythic narrative, that of the powerful and all-embracing mother/warrior goddess.

Myth-as-religious-discourse has fallen out of favor with deconstructionists, feminists, reductionists, and others. Eliade has been accused, not entirely unfairly, of simply affirming instances that fit his pattern and ignoring instances which do not fit, as well as of basing his theory on the existence of an un-falsifiable "essence."  In this project, I do not claim that there *is* an essence which is Hinduism. I simply claim that my data suggest that the culture which produced these images drew on a common pool of resonant symbols, which contemporary insiders identified as coextensive with "the sacred" and with Hinduism; and that these images have something to tell us about that

how that identification mediated religious and cultural anxieties in particular historical circumstances.

Critics of *sui generis* religion point out that Eliade's timeless phenomenological approach ignores questions of social control and authority.[2] As June McDaniel notes,

> The universalism followed by Eliade and other scholars of comparative religion was based on the idea of the sacred as the common goal of religions... This idea has been attacked by a group calling itself Postmodernist, or sometimes Deconstructionist. They claim that all religious understandings are political, that belief in any common or universal religious truth is superstition and intellectual colonialism, the imposition of Western religious ideas (such as universalism) on non-Western victims. No legitimate comparisons can be made between world religions, as religions are only responses to social history and alien to each other. (McDaniel, 2003)

However, as Rennie indicates, Eliade's broad theories lend themselves well to the analysis of historical contexts in which questions of social control and authority were salient to the anxieties of the time – as the catastrophe of colonization[3] was mediated by the narrative of the warrior/mother goddess who restores order on behalf of her children.

Moreover, the idea of "the sacred" as the goal of religion is indigenous, and central, to Indian religious thinking; and, as we shall see, the boundaries between "the political" and "the religious" are historically far more porous in India than in the West. I

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[2] See Rennie, *Reconstructing Eliade*, especially chapter 14, for a thorough discussion of these issues. In Eliade's own opinion,

> It was important…not to let ourselves become fixed in the historico-cultural point of view, and to inquire whether, in addition to its own history, a symbol, a myth or a ritual, might not reveal something of the human condition regarded in its own right as a mode of existence in the universe…(Eliade, *Images and Symbols*, 175, cited in Rennie 1996: 181)

[3] By the time these images were produced, colonial rule had encountered a major challenge in the form of the so-called "sepoy rebellion" of 1857 – a challenge which is referenced in some of the images we will be examining. By the 1880s, the era of the earliest indigenous lithographs, the indigenous print media were vehicles for many voices which "experienced and articulated their sense of changing times as a crisis of faith" (Sarkar2001: 271), expressing anxiety over colonial control as threatening to *dharma* and to India's identity and integrity on both religious and political fronts. It is no accident that the figure of Durga destroying the buffalo demon became such a widely reproduced artistic trope at this time.

maintain that there is no contradiction in considering myth in Hinduism both in terms of "a response to social history" and, as Eliade does, in terms of its meaning-making, adaptive value in interpreting history's catastrophes.

One current strand of the debate on myth, represented by Russell McCutcheon and Bruce Lincoln, considers myth neither as intrinsically true nor intrinsically false, but as meaning-making narrative, a kind of symbolic action or strategy for constructing, authorizing, or contesting identities (Braun and McCutcheon 2000: 200). From this perspective, borrowed from symbolic anthropology, myth offers a way to explain or make sense of a world, or a circumstance, which does not seem to make sense. Mythmaking manages anxieties by making particular and contingent worldviews appear to be absolute and universal, and thus acceptable.

In Lincoln's words,

> Myths are not snapshot representations of stable taxonomies and hierarchies…[T]he relation between social order and the stories told about it is much looser and…considerably more dynamic, for this loose fit creates possibilities for rival narrators…(Lincoln: 150)

For McCutcheon, myth is action. Myth *is* not something, it *does* something: myth as a rhetorical device makes *this* social identity of ours possible and authoritative. In so doing, myth may act to preserve and consolidate particular discourses of power (as in the Nazi myth of Germans as a powerful master race), or it may work to create new ones that can disrupt the dominant discourse.) It is always important to know who is framing the narrative, and to what end. An example of a myth which disrupted colonial discourse in pre-Independence India was the narrative of the Aryan golden age. In this narrative, widely espoused by the Arya Samaj, Hinduism had descended into superstition as a

result of foreign influence, and needed to be returned to its original state. In the golden age, the continent of India was united under the legendary Indo-Aryan emperor Bharata, the Vedic *varna* (caste) system was based on virtue, not birth; women as well as men were scholars; and practices such as child marriage, *sati* (widow immolation), the seclusion of women, and polygamy did not exist. The land was prosperous and the people lived wisely and virtuously according to Vedic principles under the strong but benevolent rule of a righteous king. (Kumar 1993:22)

## The Narrative Myths of Colonial Construction and *Sanatana Dharma*

In this project, I consider two narratives about Hindu identity. The first narrative claims the religion Hinduism as a colonial construction, resulting from the application of rational, implicitly European organizing principles to a chaotic set of beliefs and cultural practices; in this narrative, Hindus are understood to be people who practice this religion, just as Christians are people who practice another world religion, Christianity. The second narrative claims Hinduism as *sanatana dharma*, an ancient "family" of symbols and practices whose multiple branches may be likened to a giant banyan tree, but which is ultimately rooted in Vedic tradition. India's ancient tradition of religious inquiry notwithstanding, until very recently the academic study of religion has had very little influence on "insider" discussions of Hinduism. The question becomes not, Which is right? But, who has the authority to make pronouncements about a group's culture, its religious beliefs and practices? Who sets the terms of discourse, and who frames the narrative?

The discourse of *sanatana dharma* is by no means monolithic. It can be divided, broadly, into two schools of thought,. The first, universalist and inclusive, is associated with Gandhi, who self-identified as a *sanatani* Hindu. (M. K. Gandhi. "Young India, 6-10-1921". Accessed February 25, 2010 < http://www.indiadivine.org/audarya/hinduism-forum/23767-mahatma-gandhi-sanatani-hindu.html>) The second is Hindu-chauvinist and associated with the secular nationalist leader Veer Savarkar.[4] In the 1920s Savarakar popularized the term "Hindutva" – "Hindu-ness" - as equating religious and national identity. In this view, an Indian, whatever his religious community is a Hindu, a formulation which effectively erases Jain, Buddhist, Parsi, Christian and Muslim communal identities. From the Hindutva point of view, *sanatana dharma* names a state of affairs in which Hindus are the hereditary majority and India, identified with the ancient Aryan land of *Bharat Varsha*, should be ruled by Hindus as a Hindu state. (Van der Veer 1994: 1-2). In the name of Hindutva, in 1992 a mob demolished the Ayodhya mosque said to be Lord Rama's birthplace. We shall advert to Hindutva ideology in discussing Bharat Mata as nationalism's iconic goddess. However, my attention in this project has focused less on the excesses of Hindutva than on the more universalist, Gandhian understanding of Hinduism as *sanatana dharma* which emerges from a close reading of some of the images presented here. I recognize the problems with the term *sanatana dharma*, and I use it to refer to indigenous constructions of Hinduism without intending any Hindutva ideological stance.

[4] Ashis Nandy characterizes Hindutva ("Hindu-ness"), as "an ideology for those whose Hinduism [in the sense of a faith] has worn off." (Nandy 1991). "Hindutva defies all attempts at analysis…[It] is not a word but a history…Hinduism is only a derivative…of Hindutva" (Savarkar 2009:3)

I use my knowledge of Hindu myth, culture, and recent history to provide as "thick"[5] and insightful a description as possible of the images under consideration. I attempt to understand what a practicing Hindu devotee in the late-colonial period would have understood them to mean, but I am well aware of the historical and cultural distance between myself and such a person. While Eliade may have failed at times to realize that his objective stance was affected by unconscious presuppositions, I strive for objectivity by recognizing that I cannot, ultimately, attain it. It is not essential for me to perceive religion, or Hinduism, as a timeless essence; my scholarly success depends on the degree to which I can set aside my own temporal and cultural conditioning to "get inside the head" of someone who is convinced of that.

## Insider/Outsider

In Russell McCutcheon's formulation, the emic or "insider" approach to religious studies aims to reproduce as accurately as possible the view of the informants who actually live in the culture or religion being described. (McCutcheon 1999) The "etic" or outsider view assumes that the observer is objective, rational, and in possession of adequate training, theory and method to make sense of what he observes and then report it to fellow scholars, as well as to the interested public. What the observed think of what he thinks is not necessarily important, since they probably don't read English in any case.

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[5] The concept of "thick" description derives from the work of philosopher Gilbert Ryle and anthropologist Clifford Geertz. It describes a way of viewing culture which "sees through" surface appearance to reveal deeper layers of meaning. The classic example is of winking: superficially observed, a wink involves no more than the contraction of muscles at the outer eye; however, the wink may be used to indicate a hidden meaning to the winker's spoken statement, or even to parody such an indication of meaning. A "thick" description of the winking event takes into consideration not only the physical contraction of the eye muscles, but the layers of implied meaning of the wink in a given context. (Geertz, Clifford, "Thick description: toward an interpretive theory of culture", in: *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays.* Basic Books, New York, 1973, pp. 3-30)

The "etic" view involves gathering as many descriptions as possible from "insiders", organizing them, comparing them, and "redescribing" them into an academic system of the researcher's devising. Mc Cutcheon notes Wilfred Cantwell-Smith's comment that no position should be considered valid unless the insider, or "believer" since our subject is religion, would accept it as true**. (***Ibid.*, p. 7*)* One problem with this position is that, although it respects the feelings of the "insider," it overlooks the possibility that the outsider may actually be in a position to observe important points that the insider is simply unaware of, such as discrepancies between the insider's stated beliefs and actual practice. While such an observation may be unwelcome, neither can it be dismissed. Failing to ask about myth's sociopolitical implications, accepting it simply as a charming exotic narrative meaningful to the "insiders" who tell it but clearly nonsensical to us, is to disembody the discussion. I endeavor in this project to recognize political and economic factors in the "imagination" of a modern Hindu religious identity, as revealed through mechanically reproduced goddess images, in the context of the historical moment when the British raj was ending and India was not yet independent.

My research material consists of mechanically reproduced images from ca. 1890-1947. I focus on images of the Devi, or "great goddess" in her classical aspects of Durga/Kali/Laksmi/Sarasvati as well as her modern incarnation as Bharat Mata. I ask the questions: What do these images tell us about the formation of modern Hindu identity? How did they empower practicing Hindus to construct their *own* narrative about who they were and to claim an identity that was not imposed by a foreign power but "imagined", called into being, in indigenous terms? I have limited my study to goddess images specifically because goddess images seem to tap into some of the deepest and broadest

roots of Indian mythology and religiosity. Veneration of the goddess dominates rural religious life; it is "without question the most widespread form of religiosity expressed in the Hindu tradition." (Pintchman 2001:117) Moreover, these images provide a visual dimension to the printed-word discussion *dharma* and threats to *dharma* in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries, a discussion which, as we shall see, was often framed in gendered terms.

Specific items include color lithographs, trade labels, postcards, and photographs. Such materials are typically anonymous and undated, and my examples are no exception; their publishers, when identified, are likely to have gone out of business decades ago. I selected images which, with few exceptions, had not been previously published, and which both provided the material for phenomenological investigation and served to illustrate indigenous narratives of "who is a Hindu" and what constitutes dharmic behavior in the pre-Independence period. By focusing on images which have not been previously published, I hope to add to existing discussions on goddess images and on Hindu identity. In two instances, I have used non-goddess images of the same period to illustrate technical points about the ways in which images were sometimes manipulated, either by end-users or by publishers, to express unusual connections between certain deities and individuals.

The transformation of person into symptom or problem is characteristic of colonial narrative, in which the rational and efficient European is called, like a medical specialist, to "clean the land" of superstition and primitiveness. (Said 1979: 226) Ashis Nandy, writing about the psychology of colonialism in India, says that " [C]olonialism is first of all a matter of consciousness and needs to be defeated in the minds of men…[T]he

liberation ultimately has to begin from the colonized and end with the colonizers." (Nandy 2005: 63) He describes colonization, the "drive for power over men", as the byproduct of

> a world view which believes in the absolute superiority of the human over the nonhuman, the masculine over the feminine, the adult over the child, the historical over the ahistorical, and the modern and progressive over the traditional or savage. (*Ibid.,* p. x)

As we shall see, the "colonial construction" narrative of Hinduism dismisses indigenous views of religious history and mythology as childish, ahistorical, primitive, and "feminine"; it is thus particularly interesting to see how gendered symbols of power, integration and efficacy emerged in the indigenous narrative through symbols of the goddess.

Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak coined the phrase "white men saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak 1988: 297) to describe the British abolition of *sati* in the nineteenth century; it could be applied to the colonial project in India generally. As Edward Said famously observed, colonialism involves the construction of colonizer as Self, colonized as Other (Said 1979). In the history of European colonialism, that binary is typically gendered, nowhere more so than in India. The following prints from turn of the century English publications illustrate the colonial narrative in visual terms, from the graphic representation of a gendered "wholly other" Kali, to the imperative to rescue Indian women, to a representation of India, personified as a barefoot women, bowing gratefully to George V. These are, of course, British colonial representations of "Hindu" practices, not Indian images produced for circulation and consumption by a Hindu public. They are followed by examples of an indigenous counternarrative. The first picture, entitled "Idol of the Bloody Goddess Kali, at Calcutta, India", appeared in Frank S.

Dobbins' *Error's Chains: How Forged and Broken*, a missionary polemic first published in 1883 by Standard Publishing House, New York, and subtitled:

> *A complete, graphic, and comparative history of the many strange beliefs, superstitious practices, domestic peculiarities, sacred writings, systems of Philosophy, legends and traditions, customs and habits of mankind throughout the world, ancient and modern. The whole profusely illustrated from authentic and trustworthy authorities.*

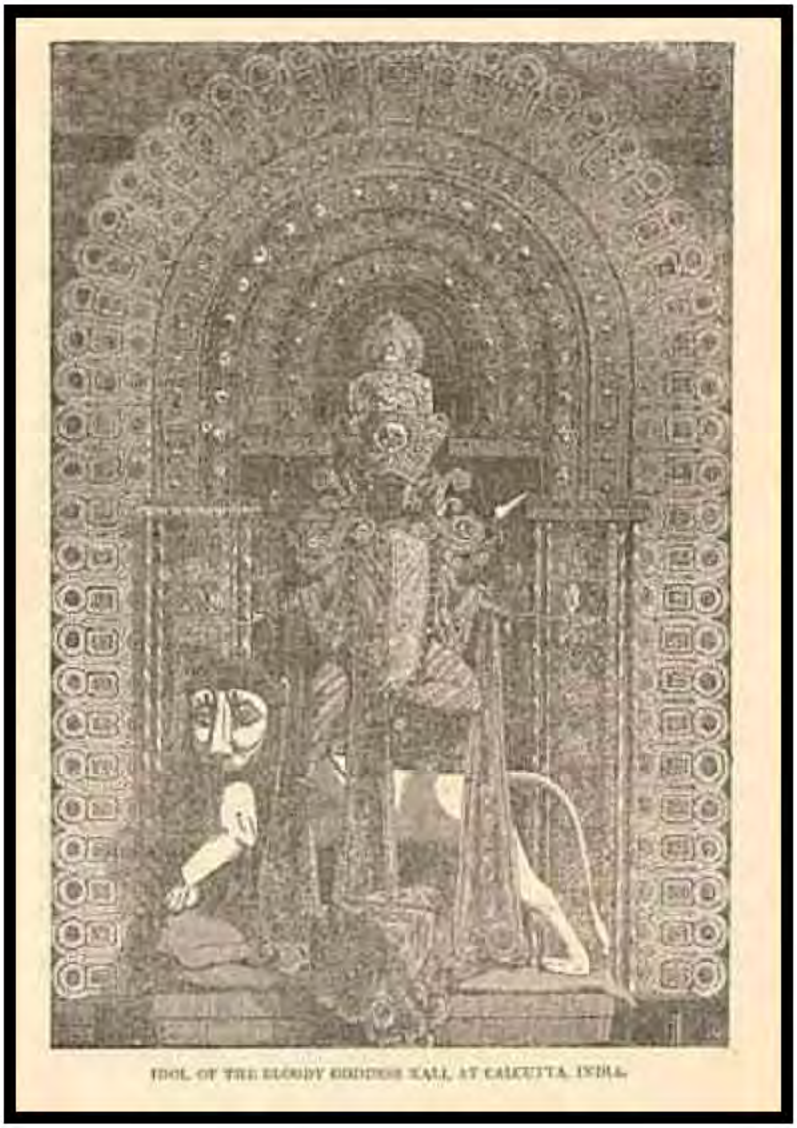


**Figure 1 The Bloody Goddess Kali**

While exact publishing figures for *Error's Chains* are not available, it is worth remarking that, in 2011, copies of the 1883 edition continue to appear on Amazon.com, suggesting that a very large number of copies must have been printed. An online edition is available through Scribd. The image shows an ornately draped, elaborately crowned figure with four arms, perched above a lion which stands over a recumbent, apparently naked human figure whose details are largely obscured by draperies. The goddess' torso is entirely covered by something resembling a shield. The objects in her four hands are difficult to make out, but they appear to be two flowers, a dagger, and (perhaps) a mirror. The iconography appears to be borrowed from Indian art, but the image itself is clearly Western in the stiffness of its lines and the care with which bodies are obscured. Kali seized British imagination as the personification of all that was dark, bloody, horrible and incomprehensible about India; her image appeared widely in popular publications such as this one, and, later, in "magic lantern" slides, as the epitome of a gendered and wholly "other" Hinduism.[6]

The second image, entitled "The Hindoo Mother", depicts a weeping woman committing the body of her infant child to a river. This touching image, which appeared in the Victorian literary annual *Fisher's Drawing Room Scrapbook* (1832-1854),[7] is an example of a popular magazine genre which purported to show the suffering or "degradation" of women under Hinduism, and to illuminate the need for colonial and Christian intervention in their wretched lives. One strand of colonial narrative attributed India's high infant mortality rate to the practice of child marriage, which was represented

[6] [Kali] was universally regarded by the English…as representing the worst impulses in popular Hinduism. Of Shaktism, to which Kali-worship is central, Monier-Williams said that it was "Hinduism arrived at its worst and most corrupt stage of development." (Monier-Williams, Monier, *Religious Thought and Life in India,* 184-185, cited in Roy 1998: 117)

as one of the abuses stemming from idol-worship. The temple in the background of this picture reminds the viewer that this infant's death, along with the "unchristian" disposal of its body, can and should be laid at the door of paganism.



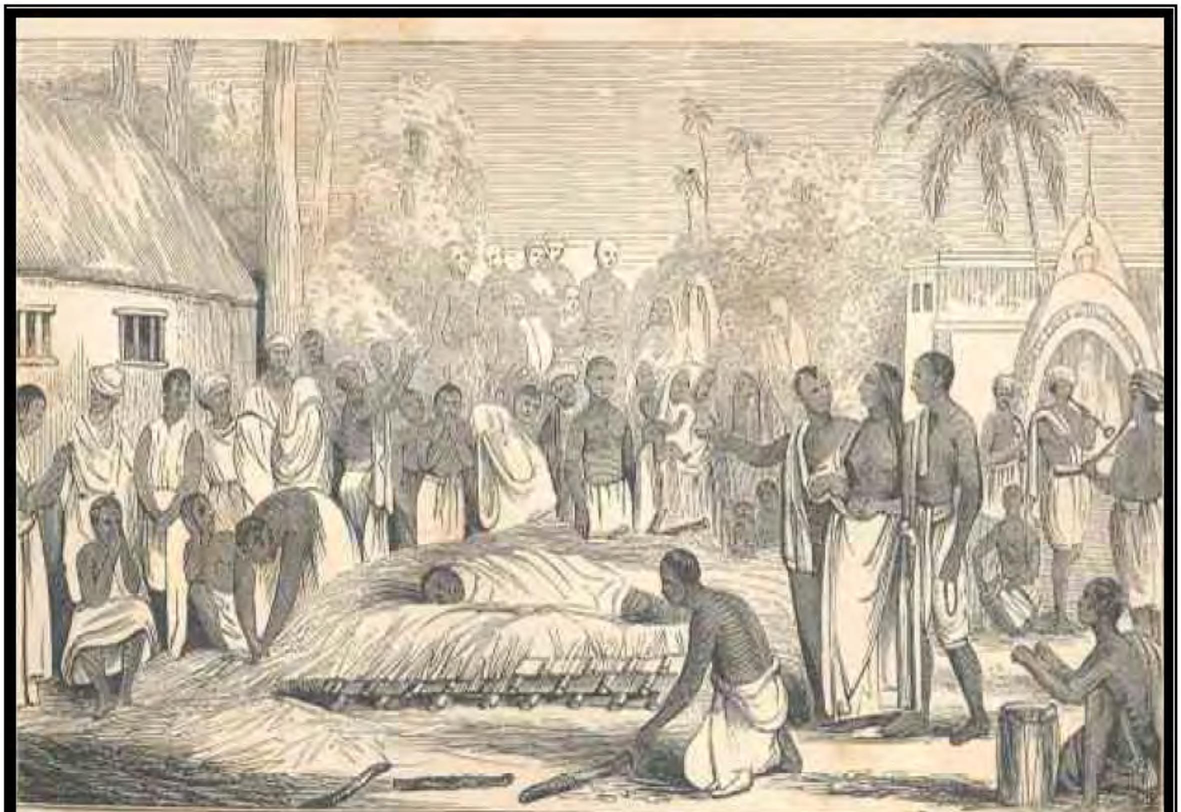
**Figure 2 The Hindoo Mother**

[7] Used copies of the *Drawing Room Scrapbook* for some years are available on Amazon, while 1836 and 1847 appear as paperback reprints.

The third image, “Ceremony of Burning a Hindu Widow with the Body of her Late Husband,” is a woodcut engraving from 1851, taken from a work impressively entitled

> *A Pictorial History of China and India: A Description of Those Countries and their Inhabitants, Embracing the Historical Events, Government, Religion, Education, Language, Literature, Arts, Manufactures, Productions, Commerce and Manners and Customs of the People, from the Earliest Period of Authentic Record to the Present Time,* edited by Robert Sears, published by Robert Sears, 128 Nassau Street, New York, and For Sale by Book Agents and Book Sellers Generally.

This work, once published privately by Mr. Sears, is now available online through Google Books, while the image of the burning widow is reproduced online in Wikipedia and elsewhere. It shows village people preparing a pyre, on which there lies a shrouded corpse. A bare-breasted woman stands nearby closely flanked by two men; whether they are supporting or coercing her is unclear, but one gestures towards the pyre while the other appears to nudge her towards it with his shoulder. In the background we see musicians poised to play, perhaps to drown out the widow’s shrieks, as well as a crowd of witnesses to this unfolding ceremony. As Chakroborty Spivak and other scholars have noted, the issue of *sati* was used as a trump card to justify the British colonial project in India, while it became the symbolic center of public Indian concern over threats to *dharma*.



CEREMONY OF BURNING A HINDU WIDOW WITH THE BODY OF HER LATE HUSBAND.

**Figure 3 Burning a Hindu Widow**




**Figure 4 Delhi Durbar**

Figure 4, from the popular journal "Punch,[8]" is a European artist's representation of a barefoot, feminine India paying obeisance to the enthroned King-Emperor at the 1911 Delhi Durbar.[9] His dominance is clear: he sits elevated, holding a sceptre and orb representing the world. India has one foot just above the bottom step; she approaches tentatively, head bowed and hand raised ; her forehead is aligned with the king's high leather boot, and perhaps she is moving toward the action of laying her head at his feet. She is well, even elaborately dressed, unlike the bereaved mother and the widow; she wears the jewelry of a married woman, but no husband is evident; is she the king's grateful concubine?

If a picture is worth the proverbial thousand words, these four massproduced images from the English print medium convey volumes. Here in broad outline is the colonial myth of Hinduism, a story conveyed with a sober an aura of scientific objectivity. The problem is framed in terms of ethnographic examples: the child-mother, the widow, the idol whose nefarious influence underlies the others' social tragedies; and the solution, in the allegorical figure of the graceful, exotic, feminine subject, bowing gratefully to her lord.

It is no accident that all of these images are depictions of "the feminine" in some essentialized form. That the dramas of British colonial domination in India and of India's struggle for independence were played out in gendered terms is not a new idea, but it has thus far been explored with more attention to written texts than to visual images.

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[8] *Punch, or The London Charivari*, was published from 1841-1992. Within a few years of its founding it had become a "household word" in England,drawing readers from all the literate classes including royalty. Early numbers sold 6,000 copies per week; circulation peaked in the 1940s at 175,000. (Victorianweb.org/periodicals/punch/pva44.html)

[9] A Delhi Durbar, or Imperial Durbar, (from the Mughal term *durbar*, "court"), was a mass assembly held by British colonial powers in the former Mughal capital to mark the coronation of a British sovereign. The

Motivated by Diana Eck's observation that "Long before people wrote textual treatises, they "wrote" in images…[which] constitute a considerable heritage of the human imagination for the scholar of religion" (Eck 1998), I explore the counter-narrative of Hinduism as told by Hindus through the lens of indigenous images – specifically, mechanically reproduced "mythopictures" from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The images which follow were produced by Indian artists, for an Indian audience.

1911 assembly commemorated the coronation of George V and Queen Mary as Emperor and Empress of India.




**Figure 5 Kali Devi**

The first image shows an indigenous nineteenth-century lithograph from an unknown publisher of Kali Devi, "goddess Kali," in her characteristic battlefield posture. She has four arms and three eyes. She wields a bloody, curved knife and holds a freshly severed head in her lower left hand; she is garlanded with severed heads, and she tramples on the body of her husband, Shiva. Her upper right hand makes something

resembling the “fear-not” gesture; however, this gesture is directed not to the viewer, but to the celestials who appear in the clouds above her or to unseen others in the background. She gazes over her left shoulder, out of the frame, not at the viewer. The terrain around her is strewn with corpses and clouded with smoke. Unlike the Western “bloody goddess Kali” image, which is meant as an awful warning, this far more graphic image was an object of reverence and worship. A copy hung in the room of Sri Ramakrishna of Calcutta, a passionate devotee who experienced Kali as his beloved mother.

The second image shows Bhumidevi, the mother whose body is the earth, the source of nourishment and bounty and the sustainer of all living creatures in her role as the consort of Vishnu (the sustainer). She sits on Vishnu’s left; on his right is her co-wife Lakshmi Devi (identified by the lotus in her hand), the personification of wealth and rulership. (Ravi Varma Press, ca. 1910s) Together, they suggest stability, authority, sovereignty, and territory as sacred space. Vishnu’s gaze meets the viewer’s squarely, typically of deities’ gaze in *darshani* images (i.e., images meant for worship: Joshi 1994) – a style in which subject and viewer exchange mutual gazes. The goddesses gaze at him, and perhaps at each other. Although Bhumi Devi was often depicted solo, and forward-gazing, in bronze sculptures of this period, she rarely appears alone in lithographs.



**Figure 6 Bhumi Devi, Vishnu, Lakshmi**

The third image, "Rani Sati", a lithograph from the 1930s, shows "Queen Sati" as an object of reverence. She is crowned, she carries the trident often associated with Kali/Durga, and her right hand points to a swastika, ancient symbol of auspiciousness in

Indo-aryan culture. She wears the garland, bangles, forehead mark and red sari of a married woman, all auspicious signs. Her eyes gaze directly forward, engaging the viewer, in classic *darshani* style. Behind her, a man – the spirit of her dead husband? – stands gazing at her, with his hands folded in a gesture of reverence.



**Figure 7 Rani Sati, 1930s**

The final image, from the 1950s or later, shows Bharat Mata, the modern "Mother India." She is crowned, and her body is draped in the Indian national flag, whose folds billow out to encompass the subcontinent. She is surrounded by deities and holy men representing the major Indian religions. A small figure of the goddess Sarasvati[10] stands at the top left; below her is seated a Sikh guru, identifiable by his beard and headgear. Directly beneath the Sikh is Krishna playing his flute; to Krishna's right is a Jain, perhaps Mahavira; forming a triad with them is Mahatma Gandhi. Below Gandhi is Sai Baba of Shirdi, who was claimed by both Muslim and Hindu followers; below him, a Hindu monk. Next to Bharat Mata's right foot stands a tiny child. Moving up her left side are two renunciates of different sects, whom I am unable to identify certainly; at her left elbow is Adi Shankara; above Shankara, to the right is Sri Ramakrishna. Moving back toward the midline, we see a Buddhist monk, then Lord Rama; above Rama is Shiva, and to his left, his son Ganesha with his elephant head. At Bharat Mata's feet, where the island of Sri Lanka would be, there is a small image of Sita, imprisoned there by the demon Ravana, receiving a visit from Rama's monkey-general Hanuman. Unlike the image which shows a female India bowing to the English King, here India is represented by a fully autonomous woman who encompasses both the undivided subcontinent (there is no mention of Pakistan here) and members of all of its religious communities within her body. In contrast with the "slave girl" of the Punch caricature, this woman stands fully erect and looks confidently out of the frame at the viewer.

If the colonial narrative is: Hinduism and India are weak, pagan, feminine, superstitious, and in need of rescue by the rational (masculine) West, the counter-

[10] As we shall see, the goddess/river Sarasvati is perhaps the earliest association of a geographic feature with Hindu religious tradition.

narrative says that Hinduism and India are powerful, feminine, inclusive, and capable of self-rule. The defining image of a cringing "slavegirl" is replaced by a fully autonomous mother/warrior.




**Figure 8 The Splendour that is India**

While several scholars in various fields have considered the nationalist use of Hindu religious images (Pinney, Davis, Jain) I approach the topic of visual images and identity from a religious studies perspective. In Gerald James Larson's words,

> By a religious studies perspective, I mean a perspective that focuses on the high salience of religious experience, not simply in terms of its manifestation in historical, social, economic and political contexts, but also in terms of its substantive content, that is, its basic intellectual and spiritual claims. (Larson 1995: 43)

I use my knowledge of Hindu myth, culture, and recent history to provide as "thick" and insightful a description as possible of the images under consideration. I attempt to understand what a practicing Hindu devotee in the late-colonial period would have understood them to mean, but I am well aware of the historical and cultural distance between myself and such a person. While Eliade may have failed at times to realize that his objective stance was affected by unconscious presuppositions, I strive for objectivity by recognizing that I cannot, ultimately, attain it. It is not essential for me to perceive religion, or Hinduism, as a timeless essence; my scholarly success depends on the degree to which I can set aside my own temporal and cultural conditioning to "get inside the head" of someone who is convinced of that.

## Hinduism and the Study of Religion

The history of the study of religion is coextensive with the history of Western European imperialism and with the development of the Enlightenment project and of "modern" scientific theory. The academic study of religion emerged from the attempt of Western European traders, missionaries, and civil servants to understand the people they were attempting to profit from or influence. Based on the centrality of Christianity to

European culture, they attempted to understand the strangers in religious terms. “Religion,” for this culture at this time, was Christianity or anything that resembled Christianity in certain salient features: a rational monotheism, reliance on a sacred text, the presence of religious specialists, ritual, and some sort of unified creed. To be “like us” was to have such a religion, and to be rational in one’s thinking process. To be “Other” was to be irrational/superstitious, disorganized, and pagan or primitive in social and religious development.

In recent years, the concept of religion has come under scrutiny in Western academic circles, and there is a growing sensitivity to religion as a feature of contemporary power relations. Scholars such as Fitzgerald (2000) and McCutcheon (1997) challenge its viability as a *sui generis* category, while J.Z. Smith (1982) famously reduces religion to a “creation of the scholar’s study.” Mircea Eliade’s work on religion as a universal human impulse toward “the sacred,” formerly considered the gold standard for scholarship in the field, has been challenged as resting on unverifiable essentialism.

With regard to the study of Hinduism, some scholars question not only the usefulness of the Western category “religion” to make sense of the wide range of overlapping practices and beliefs encompassed by Hindu traditions (Von Stietencron 1997, Lipner 1994, Balagangadhara 2008**)** but the usefulness of the term “Hinduism” to describe them (Sharma 1997, 2002, King 1999) Others argue that the concept “Hinduism” coopts practices and values which are common to both Hindu and non-Hindu Indian culture, in doing so creating power differentials amongst religious communities (Searle-Chatterjee, 2000, Oberoi 1994**).** June McDaniel argues for the presence in

Hinduism of an “indigenous universalism,” not derived from Western influence, which seeks not to coopt but to embrace other traditions. She suggests that

> Indian scholars with their long history of religious study and universalist philosophy are in a unique position to promote comparative religion and to argue against postmodernists who reduce religion to politics…India now has virtually no programs in Comparative Religion, History of Religions, or Religious Studies in its universities. The tradition of universalism which respects all religions should lead to the formation of such programs, so that scholars in India can understand the language of modern comparative religious discourse and effectively participate in global religious conversation and scholarship. (McDaniel 2002: 4)

Until very recently, with the notable exception of Arvind Sharma, who teaches in the Western academy, the “religious studies” debate about Hinduism has involved relatively few Hindu scholars. In *New Approaches to the Study of Religion,* Pratap Kumar states:

> The study of religion has not yet become a discipline in the Indian universities and comparative religion/history of religion as a discipline is yet to emerge in the Indian academic world. (Kumar 2004: 128)

Kumar’s position is seconded by Gerald Larson, writing in the *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies,* 2009:

> Little attention has been given…either in modern Indian learning or in traditional Indian learning to the critical study of Hindu religion in what is usually called Religious Studies or History of Religions…This is not to suggest that there have not been distinguished Indian scholars in a variety of fields that impinge on the study of religion…It is only to suggest that there has been a notable dearth in the critical study of Hindu religion qua religion from the Indian side. (Larson 2009, 44)

It is one of my goals for this project to approach Hinduism in the study of religion by writing, if not as a Hindu, still as an empathic outsider with a longstanding personal, as well as academic, interest in Hinduism as a lived practice.

## Hindu and Hinduism as terms

Broadly speaking, there are three major branches of Hinduism corresponding to devotional practices focused on the deities Vishnu and his avatars[11], Shiva, and the Devi or great goddess. As Sharada Sugirtharajah puts it,

> While the label "Hindu" does not give any clear indication of a person's particular religious affiliation, terms such as *Vaisnava* (worshipper of Visnu) or *Saiva* (worshipper of Siva) do. A *Vaisnava* is a Hindu, but a Hindu need not be a *Vaisnava* or a *Saiva*. For those within the tradition…[t]he term "Hindu" in itself does not carry any particular religious significance as does the word Buddhist or Sikh, nor does it give any clue to the internal religious diversity. (Sugirtharajah 2003: x-xi)[12]

The term "Hindu" comes from Indo-Aryan *sindhu*, meaning "ocean" or "river", via Arabic *al-hind (*Persian *hind).* In the eighth century C.E. Muslims who settled in the Indus Valley picked up the term from the people living along the river's banks and applied it to them. In fifteenth-century Kashmir the term Hindu was used by the Shaiva historian Shrivara to distinguish Muslims from non-Muslims; it appears in sixteenth-century Sanskrit and Bengali Vaisnava sources, again, to distinguish Muslims from non-Muslims. Gavin Flood comments: "In these early sources it seems to refer to groups united by common cultural practices, such as cremation of the dead and veneration of the cow, not practiced by the Muslims." (Flood 2003:3)

It was not, however, used in a specifically or exclusively religious sense until the British began to define communities in religious terms for census and administrative purposes, at which time many Indians began to ask "which of the boxes they belonged

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[11] *avatar* = a divine incarnation. *Avataric* theology is most highly developed among Vaishnavas.

[12] Today in India the consitution considers "Hindu" a legal category under which it subsumes everyone of Buddhist, Sikh, and Jain origin, to the great annoyance of members of those groups. (King 1999:108-109, Sugirtharajah 2003: xi)

in" (Doniger 2010:25, Sugirtharajah 2003, Van der Veer 1994). "Hindu", then, is an insider term which was taken up by outsiders and then re-applied by insiders to themselves; over the centuries, it assumed nuances different from its original sense of geographic designator for the inhabitants of a particular river valley.

The first usage of "Hindu" and "Hinduism" in a specifically religious sense by an Indian is generally credited to the Bengali reformer Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), founder of the Brahmo Samaj (Killingley 1993, King 1999; Pennington 2005)[13]. In his 1821 "Defense of Hinduism," clearly intended to meet Westerners on their own ground, he wrote that

> …[N]o people on earth are more tolerant than the Hindoos, who believe all men to be equally within the reach of Divine beneficence…I was influenced [in publishing this Magazine] by the conviction that persons who travel to a distant country for the purpose of overturning the opinions of its inhabitants and introducing their own, ought to be prepared to demonstrate that the latter are more reasonable than the former. (Richards 1985: 13)

The nineteenth century saw the foregrounding of a meaning for "Hindu" which it had never carried exclusively: someone who practiced a particular religion. In that historical moment, "Hindu" and its derived cognate "Hinduism"[14] became common linguistic currency in the parlance of British colonial administrators and missionaries concerning the majority of the indigenous population of the subcontinent.

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[13] See also Roy's *Letter to Mr. John Digby, England, 1816-1817* in Glyn Richards, *A Source-Book of Modern Hinduism*, p. 8

[14] The morpheme "ism,"according to the Online Etymology Dictionary, is a "suffix forming nouns of action, state, condition, doctrine, from Fr. -isme, from L. -isma, from Gk. -isma, from stem of verbs in -izein. Used as an independent word, chiefly disparagingly, from 1680." Thomas Carlyle popularized it in *The French Revolution* as a shorthand for ideological formulas.

“Greater” and “Lesser” Traditions in the Study of Hinduism

A long-standing problem in the academic study of Hinduism is presented by the concept of “greater” (also known as “brahmanic,” “Vedic,” “orthodox,” “Indo-Aryan,” “Sanskritist”, “literary,” or “textual”) traditions, as distinct from “little” or “lesser” traditions (also known as “tribal,” “indigenous,” “Dravidian,” “regional,” “oral, ”or “vernacular”) traditions. (Redfield 1955, Marriott 1990, Kinsley 1975) This concept was popularized in anthropological studies of the 1950s (Redfield 1955, Bharati 1981) and applied specifically to the study of Indian religion by McKim Marriott in the 1990s. The “greater/lesser tradition” concept distinguishes between the religion of the masses and the religion of the scholar and the educated elite. In contemporary terms, this is similar to the academy’s distinction between the religion “of the scholar’s study” and religion as practiced “on the ground.” While it is a useful concept, like many binaries it fails through oversimplification.

The Indian anthropologist Aghenanda Bharati adds to the “greater/lesser tradition” concept by distinguishing three levels of Hindu religion. The first, which he calls “village Hinduism,” is made up of “lesser” or grassroots practices which include magical or shamanic practices and devotion to local spirits alongside some observance of mainline Hindu practices and festivals. The second level, a literate or scripture-based “Vedic Hinduism,” embraces grassroots beliefs and practices of a “great tradition” variety represented by trained scholars and itinerant monks. Bharati’s third level is the “renaissance Hinduism” associated with modern, urbanized, reformed, and to a certain extent Westernized spirituality associated with such teachers as Ramakrishna and Vivekananda (Larson 1995: 20-21; Bharati 1981).

Bharati's identification of a third level of Hinduism suggests that, in lived religion, there can be considerable overlap between "greater" and "lesser" traditions. Furthermore, he argues that the lesser traditions often connect intentionally to the greater, or Vedic, tradition through a process he calls "conscious homology", in which "little tradition" spirits, deities, or ritual actions are identified with "great traditions" (Bharati 1981: 6-7)[15]. For example, Shitala, a village goddess associated with smallpox, is explained as a local form of the great universal mother goddess, while the major goddesses Kali, Durga, and Parvati are explained as manifestations of Sakti or primordial energy. In the same vein, certain local rivers are said to be not only analagous to, but manifestations of, India's supreme sacred river, Ganga, for purposes of ritual purification; or the entire human body may be homologized to the cosmos.

Western scholars of religion, many of whom find the correspondences represented by such homologies unconvincing, have often privileged the "greater traditions". These traditions tend to be more permanently recorded in writing, hence easier to study, than "lesser traditions," whose records are often oral, or otherwise ephemeral. Moreover, "grassroots" practices may be less accessible to non-Indians who are not fluent in local languages or cultures. "Greater traditions" are associated with a, usually male, urban power elite, and "lesser traditions" in India with women and non-urban or tribal people. However, "renaissance Hindus", in Bharati's words

> [a]re the people who 'run' India on most levels of politics and economics – and their fathers were the people who inaugurated and consummated the Indian freedom struggle… They [set] the style and the mode for modern Hinduism, and

[15] "[H]omology..a form of realising or experiencing a (supposedly) *real* correspondence between an aspect of ..the microcosm and a feature of ..the macrocosm" was the foundation for religious action in the Vedic period. By realizing a homology between himself (microcosm) and world (macrocosm), the adept gained control over its underlying power. (Lipner 1994: 34, Mittal & Thursby 2008: 11, Eliade 1987)

> possibly for all Hindu beliefs…not because of their number…but because they operationalize the official culture. (Bharati 1981:16)

This project concentrates on a particular aspect of such "on the ground" or "grassroots" practice through the worship and dissemination of massproduced lithographs of a figure identified with various aspects of the great goddess.

The popularization of modern image worship, associated with such early "renaissance Hindus" as Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, has received relatively little attention from religious scholars, Western or Eastern. I suggest that these images have been overlooked by scholars not only because of the academy's propensity to study written texts, but because the goddess - as a figure independent of any male consort - is more closely associated in Western academic minds with "lesser" than with "greater" traditions. I further argue that these images should be taken seriously as representing "third level" Hinduism in its formative stage. I claim that these images played a role in "operationalizing the official culture," and in homologizing both the goddess' identity and her worshipers' sense of empowerment between local (microcosmic) and national (macrocosmic) levels.

## Western perspectives on Hinduism

Early Western contributions to the study of Hinduism prefigured the "lesser/greater tradition" binary by broadly classifying all religions as either those which resembled Christianity, and those which did not. The idea of studying religion, as distinct from studying theology, was introduced in nineteenth century Western Europe. Nineteenth-century Western scholars recognized four categories of "world religions":

Christianity, Judaism, Mohammedanism, and paganism, the last comprising all non-monotheistic and non-Western “primitive” religions. The very term “Hinduism”, a nineteenth century designator, was inspired by the European Enlightenment urge to classify things scientifically by adding suffixes denoting type, genus, and class. As used by post-Enlightenment scholars, it was meant to designate a “world religion” conceived on the European model: type, religion; genus, Hinduism. The nineteenth-century missionary view of Hinduism contained several fairly constant features. Hinduism was identified, first and foremost, with idol-worship and with Brahmanism, the latter being understood as the ecclesiastical control of the people by a powerful priestly group. Many missionaries, such as Bishop Heber of Calcutta,[16] saw the “degradation” of women in Hindusm as directly related to idol worship and to Brahmanic domination. As the visual evidence attests, in missionary minds, childhood marriage, polygamy, and the disenfranchisement of widows were all symptoms of a priest-ridden idolatrous system badly in need of salvation.

Furthermore, from a nineteenth-century Western Christian point of view, Hinduism was Christianity’s polar opposite. Where the Christian god was one, male, and human-like, Hindu deities were many, multiple-limbed and multiple-headed. Hindu deities might be female, androgynous or semi-human in form. To Europeans living in an era when ideals of rationality and order were prized, Indian gods appeared monstrous, like the four-armed “bloody goddess Kali”, because they defied both nature and rationality. (Mitter 1977) The metadiscourse of Asiatic peoples as not-rational, primitive, and superstitiously enmeshed with the material world (Inden 2000) served to justify the

[16] author of the famous verse: “In vain, with lavish kindness/The gifts of God are strown/ The heathen in his blindness/Bows down to wood and stone.”

colonial project as one of civilization, while the discourse of Hindoo-as-heathen justified the missionary agenda of conversion as salvific. By adopting a normative stance for European values, colonial administrators and scholars of religion assumed the authority to assess India's people, culture and religions in relation to European norms, and to define Hindus and Hinduism, in European terms, as heathen (synonymous, here, with "pagan.") The outsider narrative dominated.

## "Renaissance" Hinduism

Charges of irrationality and monstrosity in Hinduism were countered by members of the "numerically small, but functionally extremely important" urban elite whom Bharati calls "Renaissance Hindus" (Bharati 1981: 16). These forerunners of the nationalist movement, virtually all men, were the chief segment of India's enormous population to be closely enough involved with Europeans to know or care about European criticisms of Hinduism. Self-initiated Hindu reform movements - such as the Arya Samaj, the Brahmo Samaj and any number of *dharma sabhas* (religious organizations) - developed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. They decided that, if "sense" were to be made of Hinduism, they would be the sense-makers. They chose their own terminology, referring to themselves as *samaj* or *sabha* - both terms meaning something like "community organization." These groups, whose membership represented the urban, educated elite, agreed on certain points with the colonial assessment of Hinduism's perceived shortcomings as a modern religion, but they did not accept the colonial assessment of themselves and their countrymen as essentially primitive and irrational. Leaders such as Ram Mohan Roy, Keshav Chandra Sen, Swami

Dayananda Sarasvati, and Swami Vivekananda challenged contemporary inequalities of caste and gender, questioned or defended the centrality of image worship, and called for a rational, socially responsible form of religion. In their vision, Hinduism needed champions who would maintain its deep traditional roots while remaining flexible to the demands of modern times.

For many indigenous reformers, social evils were evidence of *dharma*'s decline. *Dharma,* a key concept in Hinduism, expresses a sense of right relationship between an individual and all levels of his environment. Often translated "religion," *dharma* literally means "that which upholds"; it encompasses such concepts as "law", "religious and social obligation," even "personal destiny." *Dharma's* decline could be accounted for by a Hindu notion of cyclical time. In this view, the world moves from a golden age in which *dharma* is fully present, to an age in which *dharma* declines to its nadir. One popular symbol for the stages of *dharma* was the cosmic cow: in the golden age, the cow stands on all four feet; as *dharma* declines, she stands on three legs, then two, and finally one. At that point, great world upheavals occur, followed by a revitalization of *dharma* and a new golden age.  Late-colonial Hindu reformers agreed that their age was one of deep decline, and pressed for the revival of *dharma* on an individual and social level. For some, such as Swami Dayananda, the decline of *dharma* was exacerbated by foreign influence, and the revival of Hindu *dharma* was associated with a militant spirit of Hindu superiority and a vigorous propaganda against Christianity, Islam, and Western culture. (Zaehner 1966:159). Others, such as Ram Mohan Roy and Keshav Chandra Sen, sought common ground with other religions without relinquishing their hold on Hindu identity.

One theme concerned all Hindu reformers. At the turn of the nineteenth century, one could scarcely participate in the discourse on Hinduism without holding some position, pro or con, on images and their worship (*murti puja*). Roy, Sen, and Dayananda eschewed image worship, and even decried it as having no basis in the Vedas[17]; others, such as Swami Vivekananda, accepted it as established practice, while Vivekananda's teacher, Sri Ramakrishna, valorized it as the practice of a "real Hindu."

These disagreements nevertheless, Hindu culture is, famously, highly visual (Eck 1998:10). While image worship was a key discussion point for Hindu reformers, European authorities understood Hinduism's images as pagan idols, with all that that implied for the colonial project.[18] I argue that the popular images of this era provide an important, and generally overlooked, lens for viewing the construction of modern Hinduism as a world religion. By focusing on a particular genre of images - late-nineteenth-century lithographs of the goddess - I intend to show how particular images of this figure embody the marriage of divergent Indian and colonial positions on the question, "What is Hinduism?"

The last decade has seen increased academic awareness of the role of popular images in India's nationalist project, past and present. This 'visual turn' in modern Indian studies has been made primarily by scholars in the disciplines of art history and media studies (Dehejia 1997; Guha-Thakurta 1992; Larson et al. 1997; Mitter 1994; Pinney 2000; Ramaswamy 2003). As Sumathi Ramaswamy puts it,

[17] The Vedas are a body of canonical scripture, originally orally transmitted, edited into final form around 800 BCE. They encapsulate the religious tradition of the ancient Aryan tribes in the Indian subcontinent, and they are regarded as "normative knowledge which saves the human being from the predicament of unfulfilled existence in this world or the hereafter" (Lipner 1994:26).
[18] Cf., for example, Lev. 18.

> This turn is marked not just by the centrality accorded to visual practices for our understanding of the modern Indian life-world, but also by the conviction that visuality (understood here broadly as regimes of seeing and being seen) itself does not lie outside history, culture, politics. Further, this turn follows from a recognition of the enormous power of images to transform and mobilise self and community…(Ramaswamy 2003: xiv)

Eck, H. Daniel Smith (1995), Richard Davis (1997), Stephen R. Inglis (1997), and June McDaniel (1996) are among the few scholars to have made the visual turn with regard to Hinduism, and to explore the "power of images to transform and mobilise self and community" from the standpoint of religious studies. In this project, I build on their arguments, first, by inquiring into the power of bazaar images to transform and mobilize Hindu religious identity through popular representations of the goddess as mother and warrior; second, by examining the dynamics of "seeing and being seen" in the worship of mechanically reproduced images.

In their work on the intersection of visuality, religion, and politics, Pinney, Jain, and Mitter have emphasized the role of religious images in developing and disseminating a nationalist consciousness (Pinney 2004, Jain 2007, Mitter 2003, Freitag 2003). Christopher Pinney writes:

> During the colonial period politics and religion were conceptually titrated into separate domains…Then, in large part because of the practice of colonial censorship and proscription, an authorized 'religion' became the vehicle for a fugitive politics. Indians were able to do things under the guise of 'religion' that they were not able to do in the name of 'politics'. (Pinney 2004: 11)

While the images *were* important to the formation of a nationalist narrative, I suggest that that narrative cannot be divorced from the issue of how to live in concert with *dharma* in a colonized world. In this project, I am more concerned with what the images can tell us about questions of *dharma* in modern Hindu religious identity than I am with their

political uses; however, I do not intend to perpetuate the colonial binary between politics and religion by insisting that the images in my study are solely religious and *not* political.

I propose to adopt a scholarly perspective which recognizes the extent to which Hindu *dharma* in late-colonial India was understood to be, in Wilfred Cantwell-Smith's phrase, "coterminous with human life in all its comprehensiveness." (Sharma 2002) To set the task as one of understanding the relationship between religion and politics in British India is to pose the question in the wrong terms if it assumes that there are such separate, different, and already constituted entities as "religion" and "politics" and then asks how each affects the other. (Cf Ogborn 2007:201)

## Hinduism: Colonial Construction vs. *Sanatana Dharma*

In chapter one, I consider two apparently opposing points of view on Hinduism. The first, that Hinduism is simply a colonial construction, is a claim based in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western scholarship. This view emerged from the attempt by Western European traders, merchants, missionaries and colonizers to understand, in religious terms, the people they encountered in South Asia. In this view, the religion now known as "Hinduism" was the result of Westerners imposing a set of Euro-Christian conceptual categories onto a collection of existing Indian beliefs and practices which had no single common trait; Indians then appropriated those categories to create a national religion for the nascent political entity, India. Scholars of religion who formulated this view sought to understand Hinduism through its written texts (Mittal & Thursby 2008: 74).

The second view, common to Hindu reformers, is a modern articulation of an ancient and indigenous Indian point of view. In this view, Hinduism has existed at least from the Vedic period[19] as a coherent tradition, *sanatana dharma* or "ancient truth/law". This point of view privileges orally transmitted knowledge, not written text, as authoritative "scripture" (Lipner 1994: 25), since the Vedas were not transcribed but meticulously passed on through oral repetition. Seen in this light, the Vedas are, quite literally, the primordial Word,[20] which is to say that the one minimum common denominator for all Hindu traditions or *dharmas* is "the acceptance of the Veda as having the same episteological power of proof (*pramana*) as direct perception and deductive inference." (Bharati 1981:2) In Swami Vivekananda's words:

> The Hindus have received their religion through revelation, the Vedas. They hold that the Vedas are without beginning and without end. It may sound ludicrous to this audience, how a book can be without beginning or end. But by the Vedas no books are meant. They mean the accumulated treasury of spiritual laws discovered by different persons in different times. Just as the law of gravitation existed before its discovery, and would exist if all humanity forgot it, so is it with the laws that govern the spiritual relations between soul and soul and between individual spirits and the Father of all spirits were there before their discovery, and would remain even if we forgot them….This is the common religion of all the sects of India. (Vivekananda, Paper on Hinduism, Chicago Parliament of Religions 1893)

These two positions, which I will call the colonial constructionist and the sanatanist or indigenous points of view, thus represent, in the broadest terms, "insider" and "outsider" approaches to the question "What is Hinduism?" By taking these views to their extremes, we expose the false binary between them and create space for a third position in

[19] Roughly, 2000 BCE- 500 BCE

[20] While the earliest Vedic written canon is now believed to have been fixed by approximately 800 BCE (Lipner 1994: 30), their oral origins are undatable. They encapsulate the religious tradition of the people, now known as the Aryans, who inhabited the northwestern part of the Indian subcontinent as early as 1200 BCE (Lipner 1994:7).

understanding what modern Hinduism means – the position of an empathic outsider, or, in Arvind Sharma's phrase, a "friendly critic." (Sharma, 1985)

From the position of empathic outsider, I argue that modern Hinduism is best understood as a religious identity which was constructed by Hindus in response to Western colonialism.  I qualify this argument further by rejecting the view that there was no such thing as Hinduism before the colonial era. Instead, I posit the construction of Hinduism on a foundation of mythic, indigenous "civilizational symbols" (Thapar 1992:70) and narratives which are far older and more culturally resonant than the modern experience of colonization. I will demonstrate that modern Hinduism represents a choice of communal identity and *dharma*, the Sanskrit word for "religion", "value," or "path of duty", made on a national scale.

The architects of modern Hinduism combined selected, indigenous religious categories with Western cultural priorities to produce a new form of religious identity analagous to a linguistic creole. A creole is a language which combines vocabulary and grammatic elements of two disparate languages; often creoles form in colonial contexts, where two groups of people with mutually incomprehensible languages are required to communicate. In the initial stage of formation, such a hybrid language is called a "pidgin"; but once the generation arises for whom it is their native tongue, it is a creole – a third entity, containing elements of both original languages but identical to, or solely derived from, neither.

That a modern Hindu religious identity arose as an expression of colonized Indians' "psychological resistance to colonialism" (Nandy 1980, viii) does not mean that colonialism was somehow its creator. Seen in light of the ethos composed of indigenous

narratives and symbols, modern Hinduism is simply the most recent example of India's ancient "tradition of reinterpretation of traditions to create [a] new tradition" (Nandy 1980: xiv), [21] and its categories represent an indigenous language of discourse (Nandy 1980: xiii).

The colonial presence inspired a collective introspection on the part of educated Indians (Karlekar 2005). Colonial efforts to define Hinduism in Western terms inspired thinkers like Roy to explain themselves in terms which would be comprehensible to Western missionaries, scholars and administrators, and precipitated the indigenous adoption of rationalist discourse. The idea of Hinduism as a colonial construction derives, then, from the Western-driven endeavor to organize and make sense of the enormous variety of indigenous traditions and practices which coexisted in India in the nineteenth century. In this view, European outsiders imposed a single conceptual category onto a heterogeneous collection of beliefs and practices which indigenous insiders did not see as a single religion in the Western sense of a unified creed with a common founder and a sacred text, but rather as a family of traditions sharing a common cultural heritage and related, if at all, through their common Vedic roots. (Pennington 2005)

[21] In Swami Vivekananda's vivid example:

> [S]ect after sect arose in India and seemed to shake the religion of the Vedas to its very foundations, but like the waters of the sea-shore in a tremendous earthquake it receded only for a while, only to return in an all-absorbing flood, a thousand times more vigorous, and when the tumult of the rush was over, these sects were all sucked in, absorbed and assimilated into the immense body of the mother faith…(Vivekananda, Address to World Parliament of Religions, Chicago, 1893)

## Colonial constructionism taken to an extreme

Proponents of the colonial construction position, such as Richard King and Robert Frykenberg, challenge the paradigm which conceptualizes Hindu traditions as a religion characterized by distinct beliefs, doctrines, sacred laws and holy texts by claiming that this conception is a colonial "construction" which does not correspond to any empirical reality. Taken to an extreme, the claim for Hinduism as a colonial construction leads to the position that there was no coherent Hindu tradition before the colonial era and that the term Hinduism is "deceptive" (Von Stietencron 1997) in its lack of a clear referent within Indian culture. According to Brian Pennington,

> Stated succinctly, this line of reasoning asserts that "there is hardly a single important teaching in 'Hinduism' which can be shown to be valid for all Hindus, much less a comprehensive set of teachings." (Von Stietencron 1995, in Pennington 2005).

As the following example shows, this argument rests on an unquestioned assumption of normativity for the Euro-Christian understanding of religion.

In Frykenberg's words,

> [T]here has never been any such thing as a single "Hinduism" or any single "Hindu" community for all of India…Furthermore, there has never been any one religion – nor even one system of religions – to which the term "Hindu" can accurately be applied. No one so-called religion…can lay exclusive claim to or be defined by the term "Hinduism." The very notion of the existence of any single religious community by this name…has been falsely conceived. (Frykenberg, in Sontheimer and Kulke 1997: 94)

Some scholars (Sugirtharajah, Balagangadhara) suggest that the colonial construction claim effectively denies Indians any agency in the construction of a modern Hindu identity. An unquestioning acceptance of European authority to decide what constitutes a "world religion" based on a Euro-Christian model places the power to

confer or deny that status to Hinduism squarely in outsider hands, privileges the colonial narrative, and leads to positions which fault the architects of modern Hinduism for *not* stepping outside the colonial paradigm, even while denying the existence of any coherent precolonial Hindu paradigm.

One example of the position I am calling sanatanist (or *sanatani*), taken to an extreme, comes from Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883). His organization, the Arya Samaj, preached a doctrine of a Vedic Aryan golden age marked by egalitarianism and humane principles (Kumar:22). In Dayananda's view, Hinduism's contemporary evils of gender and caste inequality were evidence of a modern decline from genuine Aryan values (*arya dharma*). This downward trajectory could be reversed by reclaiming ancient traditions such as education for women, flexibility in caste, the revival of Sanskrit-based ritual in the home, and by the "reconversion" of people whose ancestors had fallen away from the Vedas' original theism. In the name of return, the Arya Samaj opposed polytheism, "idol worship", and the mediation of Brahmanical authority. (Rudolph 2002: 77) Swami Dayananda also espoused and composed attacks on the falsity of other religions, in the venerable tradition of Indian religious and philosphical debate.[22] For him, the offshoots of Vedic religion, such as Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism, were the offspring of *dharmic* decline and were as false as the Abrahamic traditions.

The colonial constructionists and the *sanatanis* shared a narrative of Hinduism's decline and fall. At both poles of the discourse we encounter the view that Hinduism, though possessed of a "golden" past, has degenerated into a mess of superstitious beliefs

and quasi-magical practices. The "colonial construction" side of the argument claims one of two things. First, although Hinduism may have a solid core of wisdom, that core is hopelessly lost under accretions of superstition and degenerate practices. Western rationalism is required to reclaim the valuable material and restore to Hinduism its solid core. Second, once Hindus are shown the similarities between their ancient, but primitive, religion and the culmination of civilation represented by Christianity, most of them will abandon Hinduism in favor of the more highly-evolved system. The other side, which identified Hinduism as *sanatana dharma (*"ancient/eternal law/way"), primordial Vedic wisdom and the wellspring of human civilization, urged the rejection of everything modern, particularly everything Western, as symptomatic of decline, and a return to original Vedic values and practices. At the same time, it subsumed all Indian religions into "Hinduism," based on common cultural roots.

It is important to address the impulse to define and corral India's myriad of practices into a religion called Hinduism. Indian religions are famous for the ability to make room for heterodox or "fringe" elements, and to entertain positions that are best described as "both/and" rather than "either/or." It did not occur to pre-colonial Indians to attempt to homogenize their religious beliefs and practices on a grand scale. It was the "outsider" Enlightenment propensity for classification, imported to India through colonization, which gave rise to the question "What is Hinduism?" and to the binary answers we have been considering. In responding to that question, "renaissance" Hindus not only took up elements from within their own indigenous classical and folk traditions, but adapted their responses to the needs of modern, and therefore colonially-influenced,

[22] The practice of *vada*, or "debate," was a means for members of particular philosophical traditions to prove their logical skills against one another. The object was less to convert one's opponent, than to

times.  A Bengali proverb speaks of using a thorn to remove a thorn; renaissance Hindus made use of the "thorns" of modernity and colonial interference to remove or revise those aspects of *dharmic* practice which they considered stale, and to recast existing religious elements into a new form.

## Symbols of Unity: Mother Hinduism

A number of scholars of religion argue that, while there may have been no "Hinduism" on the Euro-Christian, world religion model in pre-colonial, there did exist a venerable "family" of culturally similar traditions, practices, myths, and symbols (Lipner 1994, Thapar 1992, Nandy 1980). Popular imagination combined complexes of such culturally resonant symbols into "cluster[s] of governing ideas" (Kakar 1986: 15, 16) to meet the religious needs of specific groups at particular times.[23] In Lipner's words, "[M]ost Hindus have the knack of being able to activate their mythic heritage so as to make life meaningful and bearable." (1994: 276 ) While there is no single supreme deity for all Hindus, the idea of a female deity, or *shakti* (literally, "power") runs very deep in Indian culture (Dehejia 1999, Erndl 1993, Pintchman 1994, Kinsley 1975).  Sometimes she appears as a warrior, such as Kali/Durga; sometimes as a mother, such as Parvati; sometimes she is represented as a male deity's consort, sometimes she is independent. Sometimes she is identified with that most maternal of animals, the cow. In the late nineteenth century, the symbol of a once powerful, independent, protective Mother, now

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sharpen one's own understanding of important metaphysical realities.

[23] For example, during the medieval period a devotional style, known as *bhakti*, became widely popular within all three communities (Vaishnava, Shaiva and Shakta). This movement emphasized a lover-beloved relationship between the devotee and God, perhaps best known through images of Krishna and his consort Radha, but expressed also through symbols of the supreme deity as a child and the devotee as mother. Into modern times, village people in parts of South India, where smallpox is rampant, revered a "smallpox goddess" whose rituals include a form of innoculation.

in need of support from her sons, arose in response to the needs of the *zeitgeist* (Chatterji 2005) In some political cartoons from the 1930s, she appears as a queen receiving the heads of freedom fighters as offerings. As Bharat Mata, "Mother India," her iconography drew on mythic symbols common to all branches of Hinduism, and her image quickly became ubiquitous.

Contemporary scholars such as Lipner (1994), Doniger (2009) and Sharma (2001) claim an advantage for the "family resemblance" model in thinking about Hinduism. As Doniger puts it:

> [S]ome scholars have tried to identify a cluster of qualities each of which is important but not essential to Hinduism; not every Hindu will believe in, or do, all of them, but each Hindu will adhere to some combination of them, as a non-Hindu would not…The elements from which the clusters are formed might include some combination of belief in the Vedas (which excludes Buddhism and Jainism), karma (which does not exclude Buddhism and Jainism), dharma (religion, law, and justice),…devotion (bhakti) to one or more members of an extensive pantheon, the ritual offering (*puja*) of fruit and flowers to a deity, vegetarianism as an ideal…, nonviolence, and blood sacrifice (which may or may not be mutually exclusive)... This polythetic approach, which owes much to the concept of family resemblance laid out by the philosopher Wittgenstein, could be represented by a Venn diagram, a chart made of intersecting circles. It might be grouped into sectors of different colors, one for beliefs and practices that some Hindus shared with Buddhists or Jainas, another largely confined to Hindu texts in Sanskrit, a third more characteristic of popular worship and practice, and so forth. But since there is no single central quality that all Hindus must have, the emptiness in the center…suggests that the figure might better be named a Zen diagram…The configuration of the clusters of Hinduism's defining characteristics changes through time, through space, and through each individual…Among the many advantages of the cluster approach is the fact that it does not endorse any single authoritative or essentialist version of what Hinduism is; it allows them all…(Doniger 2010:28-29)

Another advantage lies in this model's ability to resolve the apparent binary between Western claims for Hinduism as a barely adequate example of a world religion and sanatanist claims for Hinduism as the very model of religion. As we shall see in the images of Bharat Mata, this model resonates with the "insider" sense of relatedness

amongst Hinduism's various traditions of worship and practice, and with Hinduism's legendary ability to absorb elements from disparate sources and transform them into itself, as a family can lose or gain members without ceasing to be the "same" family. I contend that the images of Bharat Mata constitute evidence both of Hinduism's self-conferred identity as a non-exclusive "family" of diverse practices rooted in the earth of the subcontinent, and of the incorporation by that "family" of European influences without compromising its identity as Indian.

Seen in this light, the construction of modern Hinduism is not an either/or proposition, but a process of synthesis worthy of further study. I submit that the image of a "mother" with multiple forms and names became ubiquitous in the late colonial era because it best served the need of Hindus for a mythic symbol redolent of both unity and diversity. In this, I draw on Bruce Lincoln's theory of myth as a narrative device which serves to resolve anxieties in a changing or threatened world. Late-colonial Hindu society found its values, social structure, and religious identity powerfully challenged by a European narrative of chaos, paganism and irrationality crying out to be ordered by Christian rule. I claim that modern Hinduism arose as a counter-narrative which empowered Hindus to construct a flexible, complex, modern religious identity whose key components were adaptability to change, a protective stance towards "traditional" values understood in terms of *dharma*, and a valorization of feminine power, all important elements of goddess mythology.

The concept of "greater" and "lesser" religious traditions (Redfield 1956) complicates the distinction between narratives. In this model, Hinduism's "greater" (sometimes called "Indo-Aryan", "brahmanic," or "orthodox") philosophical traditions

are associated primarily with written Sanskrit texts and with practices of Vedic[24] origin, characteristically mediated by uppercaste, Brahmin male religious specialists. The "lesser" (sometimes called "Dravidian," "tribal," "regional," "indigenous," "village") or popular traditions are associated with vernacular languages, with informal theologies which draw on intertextual relationships between image and story,[25] and with localized practices in which caste and gender hierarchies are relatively flexible. In spite of obvious overlap between categories, this model is widely accepted, and it has been articulated in various ways: some scholars emphasize the dichotomy between urban and rural cultures, others on the modes of cultural transmission. An example of "high" or "classical" culture would be texts written in Sanskrit, or art created with reference to the *silpa-sastras* (canonical texts governing sculpture and architecture.) Examples of "low" or "lesser" culture include oral versions of stories or songs in regional languages, folk painting and works produced by informally trained or untrained artists, and the hybrid modern category of popular culture. This last includes film songs, television versions of classical stories performed in vernacular languages, plastic images, calendars, souvenirs, and lithographs or other mechanically reproduced images. (Erndl 1993, Kinsley 1975)

While themes from textual religion may be important to popular religion, and there is not always a clear line between the "great" and "little" traditions, scholarly

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[24] *Veda* = "sacred knowledge". The Four Vedas are India's oldest extant texts, conservatively dated to ca. 1500-500 BCE. They were orally composed and transmitted long before they were written down.

[25] Doniger writes: The Hindus have not usually viewed themselves as a group, for they are truly a rainbow people, with different colors (*varnas* in Sanskrit, the word that also designates "class"), drawing upon a wide range of texts, from the many unwritten traditions and vernacular religions of unkown origins to Sanskrit texts that begin well before 1000 BCE and are still being composed, but, more important, upon the many ways in which a single text has been read over the centuries, by people of different castes, genders, and individual needs and desires. And this intertextuality is balanced by an equally rainbow-hued range of practices, which we might call an interpracticality, on the model of intertextuality, practices that refer to other practices. (Doniger 2009: 25)

conclusions which rely exclusively upon texts are not always accurate guides to lived practice. Until recently, scholars took little interest in India’s popular religion and culture. The academic study of religion has concerned itself primarily with a “top-down” understanding of religion as hierarchically structured, with changes in practice or doctrine mediated by a priestly caste. The “lesser” or folk traditions of India often operate very differently, with changes occurring at local, grassroots levels and gradually being taken up by the surrounding culture. Erndl (1993) compares the medieval *bhakti* (devotional) poems, orally transmitted in regional languages by wandering bards, to the spread of ideas in the modern mass media. In this project, I argue for cultural symbols, including the visual, as an important kind of religious narrative in pre-colonial Indian religion, and for popular, mechanically reproduced goddess images as evidence of that narrative at work in the collective formation of a modern Hindu religious identity.

## Transliteration

Many names and terms in this work are transliterated from Sanskrit, Hindi, or Bengali. I have adopted the convention of using no diacritics; thus certain words (Krsna, Krishna; sakti, shakti; Siva, Shiva) appear with one spelling in quotations and another in the body of the text. The common Bengali surname which is spelled Chatterji, Chatterjee, Chatterjea, or Chadhopadhyay, is pronounced Chatterjee in all cases.

# CHAPTER I

# HINDUISM

## Introduction

The history of study of religion is coextensive with the history of Western European imperialism, with the Enlightenment project, and with the development of modern scientific theory. The idea of comparative religions emerged, at least in part, from the attempts of Western European traders, missionaries and civil servants to understand the people they were attempting to profit from or influence. Based on the centrality of Christianity to European culture, they attempted to understand the strangers in religious terms. The early system of taxonomy recognized "peoples" or "nations" and classified them according to kinds of ceremonies and customs they observed, and the kinds of objects or beings to which they paid homage. (Masuzawa 2005: 61) "Religion", for this culture at this time, was Christianity or, arguably, a system which resembled Christianity in certain salient features: a rational monotheism, reliance on a sacred text, the presence of religious specialists, ritual, and some sort of unified creed. To be "like us" was to have such a religion; to be "other" was to be irrational/superstitious, disorganized, and pagan or primitive in social and religious development.

In recent years, the concept of religion has come under scrutiny in Western academic circles, and there is a growing sensitivity to religion as a feature of contemporary power relations. Scholars such as Fitzgerald (2000) and McCutcheon (1997) challenge its viability as a *sui generis* category, while J.Z. Smith (1982) famously reduces religion to a "creation of the scholar's study." Mircea Eliade's work on religion

as a universal human impulse towards “the sacred”, formerly considered the gold standard for scholarship, has been challenged as resting on unverifiable essentialism. With regard to the study of Hinduism, some scholars not only question the usefulness of the category “religion” to make sense of the wide range of overlapping practices and beliefs encompassed by Hindu traditions (Von Stietencron 1997, Lipner 1994, Balagangadhara 2008), but the usefulness of the term “Hinduism” to describe them (Sharma). Others argue that the concept “Hinduism” coopts practices and values which are common to both Hindu and non-Hindu Indian culture, and in so doing creates power differentials amongst religious communities (Searle-Chatterjee 2000, Van der Veer 2001).

## Conceptions of Hinduism

This chapter focuses on historical constructions of the concept and the term “Hinduism.” I consider two points of view: first, that Hinduism was a colonial construction (Frykenberg 1989, Pennington 2006, Sweetman 2003). Taken to a logical extreme, this argument can lead to the claim that “there was no such thing” as Hinduism before the colonial era, that the term “Hinduism” is “deceptive” in its lack of a referent (Sontheimer 1989) and that existing indigenous practices can be reduced to a vague form of “paganism” and do not constitute a “real” religion at all.

The opposing point, that Hinduism has existed since time immemorial as a coherent tradition of Vedic origin, owing nothing of importance to Western influence, can, if taken to its logical extreme, result in the kind of Hindu-exclusive chauvinism (“communalism” or Hindutva, in modern Indian parlance) which is associated with

politically extreme groups who bomb mosques and commit terrorist acts against Muslims in the name of *sanatana dharma*,[26] "eternal religion."

In this project, I seek a middle ground. I argue that, while pre-colonial India may not have known a category of world religion classified as "Hinduism", there did indeed exist a venerable "family" of culturally similar traditions and practices (Lipner 1994:6). Proponents of this position claim there was, in pre-colonial Indian culture, a "cluster of governing ideas" which could be considered a religion in the sense that it posits, as the ultimate aim of existence, the experience of unity of self and the world. (Kakar 1986:15,16) It does not claim that there is a "thing" or essence which *is*, uniquely, Hinduism, nor does it make Eliadean claims about religion as *sine qua non.* Rather, it supposes a "family resemblance" which confers a symbolic sense of shared identity amongst groups whose theologies and practices share common, if not absolutely coextensive, ground.

In Lipner's words, "[M]ost Hindus have the knack of being able to activate their mythic heritage so as to make life meaningful and bearable." (1994: 276) In this project I use the indigenous term *sanatana dharma*, ("ancient/eternal tradition/law") to refer to this mythic heritage, which came to be re-imagined by Hindus in modern terms as Hinduism. With Lipner (1994), Doniger (2010**),** Larson (1995) and Sharma (2001**),** I claim an advantage for the "family resemblance" model for thinking about Hinduism. I submit that the ubiquitous presence in the late nineteenth century of popular art representing a

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[26] Sri Aurobindo in his famous Uttarpara speech in 1909: "When it is said that India shall be great, it is the Sanatan Dharma (Hinduism) that shall be great. When it is said that India shall expand and extend herself, it is the Sanatan Dharma that shall expand and extend itself over the world. It is for the Dharma and by the Dharma that India exists. To magnify the religion means to magnify the country." (Aurobindo, SABCL vol. 2, http://intyoga.online.fr/sabcl htm) Although the term was popularized by nineteenth century Hindu reformers such as Aurobindo, it appears in *Manusmriti* 4: 138 ("Laws of Manu"), ca 200BCE-200CE.

mother-deity, identified by various names but understood to be one Goddess, is evidence of an indigenous vision of Hinduism as a "family" of non-exclusive practices. I will argue that the modern figure of "Hind Mata" or "Bharat Mata," who emerged from existing goddess traditions and iconography, should be taken seriously by academics as a primary unifying symbol for the modern imagination of Hinduism as a continuum, or "family", of practices continually adapting to new circumstances and to the need for re-imagining religious community.

There is much controversy around Hinduism as a term and as a concept; this chapter focuses on the twin concepts of Hinduism as social construction and as an "imagined", or visualized, religious identity. I submit that the image of a "mother" with multiple forms and names best served the need of Hindus for a unifying narrative and symbol. In this, I draw on Bruce Lincoln's theory of myth as a narrative device which serves to resolve anxieties in a changing or threatened world. Late-colonial Hindu society found its values, social structure, and religious identity powerfully challenged by a European narrative of chaos, paganism and irrationality crying out to be ordered by Christian rule. I claim that modern Hinduism arose as a counter-narrative which empowered Hindus to construct a flexible, complex, modern identity whose key components were adaptability to change, a protective stance towards "traditional" values, and a valorization of feminine power, all important elements of goddess mythology.

## “Hindu” and “Hinduism” in the late colonial era

As we have noted in the introduction, the term “Hinduism” began as a nineteenth century designator, inspired by the European Enlightenment propensity for classifying things scientifically by adding suffixes denoting type, genus, and class. Used by Indians as a self-designator, “Hinduism” can refer to a religious or cultural identity or set of identities, sometimes though not necessarily political in nature. The meaning of “Hindu,” always a multivalent term, was complicated in the late-colonial period both by the imposition of a Eurocentric understanding of religion and by an emerging nationalist consciousness and indigenous resistance to foreign domination. The idea of a homogeneous Hinduism emerged from the colonial encounter, then, initially perhaps as a foreign construct, but subsequently as a self-created identity marker.

## Quantifying the Divine

The urge to quantify and classify religious categories, though so characteristic of post-Enlightenment Europe, was already present in Indian thought. A famous dialog from the ninth section of the third chapter of the *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad* attests to the historical complexity of attempts to quantify the divine in Indian traditions.

> Then Vidaghda Sakalya asked: ‘How many gods are there, Yajnavalkya?’
> He answered… ‘Three hundred and three, and three thousand and three.’
> ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘but how many gods are there, Yajnavalkya?’
> ‘Thirty three.’
> ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘but how many gods are there, Yajnavalkya?’
> ‘Six.’
> ‘Yes,’ said he, ‘but how many gods are there, Yajnavalkya?’
> ‘Two.’
> ‘Yes,’ said he, ‘but how many gods are there, Yajnavalkya?’
> ‘One and a half.’
> ‘Yes,’ said he, ‘but how many gods are there, Yajnavalkya?’

'One.' (Radhakrishnan 1968: 234-235)

To the academic scholar of religion, the question "What is Hinduism?" resonates with the above dialog and invites flirtation with infinite regress. "Hinduism" has been regarded by Westerners as a geograpically specific form of paganism, as a world religion, as an epiphenomenon of nationalism, as something that does not and never has existed, and much more. To Hindus, it is a cultural, geographic, religious, and/or nationalist designator for a uniquely polymorphic system of beliefs, practices, sacred histories, and values, broadly distributed amongst its three primary devotional strands.

The central question in the debate has been articulated most recently, and very thoroughly, by Wendy Doniger in her 2009 *The Hindus: An Alternative History*:

> Is there a unique and distinct phenomenon worth naming that covers the religion(s) of the people from the Veda (ca. 1200 BCE) to the Hare Krishnas in American airports and that tells us where Hinduism ends and Buddhism begins? It is useful to distinguish the objection that there is no such thing as Hinduism in the sense of a single unified religion, from the objection that the people we call Hindus lack a category, or word, for Hinduism and identify themselves not as Hindus but as Indians or Bengali Vaishnavas (worshipers of Vishnu, living in Bengal). That is, we may ask: (1) Is there such a thing as Hinduism?; (2) is that the best thing to call it?; and (3) can we do so even if Hindus didn't/don't? (Doniger 2009:24)[27]

Without attempting to settle the above questions, this chapter will explore two strands of the current academic discourse on "Hinduism" in religious studies circles. I will challenge the Western academy's historical privileging of printed texts, particularly those associated with the classics of the "greater tradition," and argue that there is much to be learned from the serious consideration of the "lesser" tradition's visual

[27] Scholars such as Vasudha Dalmia, Robert Frykenberg, Richard King, and Heinrich von Stietencron argue for Hinduism as a nineteenth-century Western colonial construction. Others, such as Wendy Doniger,

representations, particularly those highly colored, largely anonymous goddess images widely referred to as bazaar art,  god/dess photos, or Indian kitsch. I will present an example from eleventh-century temple sculpture, before moving to my primary area of interest, late-colonial mechanically-reproduced lithographic images.  To understand the development of a modern Hindu religious identity in relation to such images, we must look at India's early print culture and its origins in the heartland of goddess worship.

The growing availability in the late nineteenth century of printed vernacular books and images proved a powerful medium, particularly in the colonial capital of Calcutta, for the communal working-out of what "Hindu" and "Hinduism" were to mean in the modern world.  The combination in Calcutta of an early missionary presence and the East India Company's business headquarters spawned a printing industry which supplied tracts, Bibles, accounting forms, dictionaries and assorted printed matter to support the work of foreign trade and government.  Calcutta was also the home of indigenous block printing and painting in a style known as "Kalighat," after the famous temple dedicated to the fierce mother goddess.  Pilgrims to her shrine could buy inexpensive devotional images created by hereditary artists; as printing came into Indian hands in the 1880s, these images were supplemented and, later, supplanted by lithographs and prints.  The Kalighat painters were known not only for their religious images, but for their visual commentaries on public events and personages. Their critical stance on community life, religion, and politics found its way into the print culture of magazines and newspapers. These fostered lively public debate on government policies, modern times, and their impact on *sanatana dharma*.  In a process resembling the one which

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David Lorenzen, Gavin Flood, Arvind Sharma, Julius Lipner, and Brian Pennington, dispute this claim (Mittal and Thursby 2008: 83) on various grounds.

Benedict Anderson theorizes in *Imagined Communities*, the people of late-Colonial Bengal collectively “imagined” a modern redaction of their eternal religion through the linking devices of printed words and images.

### The Importance of Visuality - “A real Hindu”: Calcutta 1883

The main question of interest in this project is the process through which self-described Hindus “imagined”, through the print media, this problematic term’s significance in terms of their lived historical experience. One crucial dimension of that process involved a debate on the role of images: some influential reformers eschewed image worship as antithetical to modern rationality and un-Vedic to boot,[28] while others, of a more devotional bent, privileged it. (Mittal and Thursby 2008:81). Vedically sanctioned or not, the strength and antiquity of India’s visual culture is beyond question. As Diana Eck puts it in her groundbreaking study of Hindu iconography, *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India:*

> Long before people wrote textual treatises, they “wrote” in images…One must learn to “read” these visual texts with the same insight and interpretive skill that is brought to the reading and interpretation of scriptures, commentaries, and theologies.” (Eck, 1998: 12-13)

Clearly, the “reading” of images is not interchangeable with “reading” prose texts, although in both endeavors the consciousness of the reader informs his or her interpretation. In Indian culture, sacred narratives have long been transmitted by means other than writing; the Vedas were orally preserved for millennia. Memory is paramount in the accurate passing on of narratives and traditions; the consciousness of the reader (or

[28] While it is quite true that the Vedas nowhere prescribe image worship, neither do they proscribe it. Vedic altars are known to have been built in a pattern representing a falcon or hawk, which, one might argue, is a primordial and primary form of image-making in this tradition.

viewer) is an essential piece of the transmission process. Visual symbols may even be understood as "windows" to, or reminders of, a store of cultural material which the Hindu viewer has encountered before; in Eck's words, "The images and myths of the Hindu imagination constitute a basic cultural vocabulary and a common idiom of discourse." (*Ibid.*, p.17)

Art historian Ananda K. Coomaraswamy writes,

> …[J]ust as through all Indian schools of thought there runs like a golden thread the fundamental idealism of the Upanishads, the Vedanta, so in all Indian art there is a unity that underlies all its bewildering variety. (Coomaraswamy 1981: 17)

For Western scholars approaching Indian images, the problem of "reading" them – in the sense of understanding them - involves the problem of understanding how we interpret what we see, and what we bring to it. It is essential to maintain a rigorous alertness to our own "outsider" cultural predispositions and to the possibility that we are viewing the images through a European/Christocentric lens which may cause us to "misread" them due to our unfamiliarity with their terms of discourse.

Indian temples, the earliest instances of which are the rock-cut and cave temples of southern and western India - dating to the 3rd and the 2nd centuries B.C. E. – provide some of the first known images of Hindu iconography, whose basic "vocabulary" was enlarged in the mechanically reproduced images of the late colonial era. These include many feminine images of a victorious warrior-goddess as well as of nurturing, maternal figures; these two modes of feminine representation were to join in the late nineteenth century in the figure of *Bharat Mata*, Mother India. These figures were not simply statues to be looked at, but *murtis*, divine images to be engaged by the worshipper through touch – garlanding with flowers, bathing with water or milk, anointing with colored powders – as well as through visual relationship (*darshan)*. (Eck, 6-7) With

regard to these particular goddess images, it must be emphasized that they represent episodes from existing traditions about the goddess as personifying primordial energy and ground of being, and that the goddess' appearance and attributes are based on deep-rooted cultural symbols, or myths, which were orally and visually transmitted long before they were written down. According to art historian Vidya Dehejia,

> Sometime during the first and second centuries, images of goddesses to appear in the …medium of stone, and many of these featured a warrior goddess, most often with six arms, grappling with a buffalo demon. Recently it has been demonstrated that such images, carved in red sandstone, appear quite suddenly in large numbers in and around the center of Mathura, south of Delhi. In fact, Mathura seems to have had a near monopoly on such images that predate the *Devi Mahatmya*[29] text by some three centuries…(Dehejia 1999: 20)

Missionaries, predominantly Protestant, saw India's spectacular iconographic heritage as "idol worship" of the sort condemned by the Old Testment and denounced it as such (Oddie 2206). Two influential Hindu reformers held similar positions, though for different reasons. Ram Mohan Roy, inspired partly by an Islamic-influenced education, rejected image worship as overly literal and incompatible with Vedic doctrines of nonduality. (Richards 1985). Roy's younger contemporary Swami Dayananaanda Saraswati (1824-1883), founder of the Arya Samaj (1875, Bombay) denounced as non-Vedic not only idol worship but all doctrines of divine incarnation. Dayananda dated his own aversion to image worship to a childhood experience of seeing mice nibbling on the offerings made to an image of Shiva. He stated categorically: "God being Formless and Omnipresent cannot have an image," (Richards 1985) promoting instead aniconic worship based on the Vedic fire ceremony *agni hotra*.

[29] The *Devi Mahatmyam* describes the victory of the goddess Durga over the buffalo demon Mahishasura. Composed ca. 400-500 CE, its authorship is ascribed to the sage Markandeya.

Despite the great influence of both reformers in intellectual circles, popular culture remained enthusiastically visual and devotional. In 1878, both the Calcutta Art Studio (Bengal) and the Chitrashala Press (Maharashtra) began producing highly colored chromolithographs of deity figures (Pinney 2004), some as part of advertising campaigns, while European manufacturers commissioned "trade labels" bearing images of deities and mythological figures to sell their products in the Indian colonial market. Such images were sometimes framed, sometimes simply tacked up on the wall, and incorporated into home altars by their end users. Writing between 1885-1895, the Reverend J.E. Padfield of the Church Missionary Society described seeing in wealthy Hindu homes near Madras:

> gorgeous and grotesque native productions, being paintings on glass that can be found in almost every fairly large bazaar…[and] glaring labels from the Manchester cotton goods that one sometimes sees adoring the walls or doors or shutters. (Rev. J.E. Padfield, *The Hindu at Home, Being Sketches of Hindu Daily Life* (Madras, 1896), p. 21, cited in Pinney 2004: 17)

Image worship (*murti puja)* was central to the ritual of most of the communities which eventually gathered under the category Hindu (Dalmia 1997:381), but nowhere was it more vital than in Calcutta, the heartland of Kali worship. There, even leaders of the aniconic Brahmo Samaj found themselves drawn into the passionately mystical, overwhelmingly devotional, and highly visually-oriented orbit of Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886). A priest of Kali, and a mystic famous for his trances and visions of the divine mother, Ramakrishna was one of the most remarkable religious leaders of his time. The following excerpt, recorded by his disciple "M", recounts a visit to the home of Nanda Bose, who had many pictures of deities hanging on all sides of a large hall, and Ramakrishna's spontaneous declaration to him: "You are a real Hindu!"

> The Master looked at the pictures…At the very sight… [he] was overwhelmed with ecstasy; he sat down on the floor and remained a few minutes in that spiritual mood… Sri Ramakrishna then saw pictures of Dhumavati, Shorasi, Bhuvanesvari, Tara, and Kali.[30] He said: "All these portray the terrible aspects of the Divine Mother. If one keeps these pictures, one should worship them…" …
>
> After seeing the pictures, Sri Ramakrishna went to the master of the house and said: "I am happy today. It is grand! You are a real Hindu. You have these pictures instead of English ones. I am surprised!…These are very large pictures. You are a real Hindu."
>
> Nanda: "I have European pictures also."
>
> Master (smiling): "They are not like these. I am sure you don't pay much attention to them." (*Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*: 816)

Sri Ramakrishna's use of the designation "a real Hindu" in connection with the images points to the existence of open questions about what it meant to be Hindu. His comment about the European pictures suggests that a "real Hindu" was to be defined in contrast with European culture and values. Implicit in the above account are questions of Hindu devotional tradition in relation to Western rationalism; of Indian and Western aesthetics; and of authority.

It is my claim that nineteenth-century "bazaar" images, like those on Nanda's walls, played a significant though little-remarked role in establishing both a new "Indian" aesthetic and a democratic model of Hinduism, in which the pictures' owners enjoyed an unprecedented freedom with relation to their images. Unlike temple *murtis*, or "statues", which are formally installed in fixed positions and whose worship is mediated by specialists, these cheap, portable deity images could be installed anywhere, by anyone. By choosing what pictures to hang, in what combination, their owners could create personal theologies; because the pictures were available to them at any time, without

[30] These are five of the ten *Mahavidyas*, aspects of the mother goddess. They illustrate her power to

mediation by priests or temple personnel, they were able to act as their own *pujaris* ("worship directors," or priests). Thus, the possession of images, and their owners' practice of *murti puja*, authorized the owners as "real" Hindus, and makes an identity claim: A real Hindu is someone who owns and interacts in a devotional manner with deity images. Ramakrishna's comment to Nanda,"You are a real Hindu!" does not confer identity; it affirms an existing condition brought about by Nanda's actions.

Ramakrishna's own ecstatic-devotional orientation towards Mother Kali privileged sincere worship and personal devotion. Kali's devotees see her as both beloved and potentially dangerous; to invite her into one's home and then ignore her is risky, hence Ramakrishna's admonition to Nanda: "If one keeps these pictures, one should worship them." ( See McDaniel 2006: 82; Fuller 1992: 66-72; Doniger 2009: 390-97; Pintchman 1994: 203-204) The Mother's images, then, are far more powerful and important than European pictures. Elswhere, Ramakrishna equates European pictures with worldly success and power; in the example above, he distinguishes these from Nanda's large, prominently displayed deity pictures. He singles out the goddess' pictures as images that should be not only hung on the wall, but related to, worshipped, with flowers, colors, and lights. European pictures are acceptable for display, but they are "not like" deity pictures and should not command the same sort of attention. European pictures are only pictures; pictures of deities are *murtis*, "phenomenal forms" of the divine.[31] (Fuller 1992:85-86, 59) The size, number and prominence of Nanda's

manifest herself in various forms according to the needs of her devotees. (Cf Kinsley 1988, pp 161-165).

[31] In his discussion of worship in *The Camphor Flame*, C.J. Fuller says:

> Images [*murtis*] are normally man-made artifacts. They are not usually considered to be sacred objects until they have been consecrated by installing divine power within them…Frequently, a picture of a deity substitutes for an image. Pictures have probably always been used, but the advent of cheap color printing has made an enormous selection available in contemporary

deity pictures, and the amount of attention they command relative to his English pictures, reveal Nanda as "a real Hindu" in Ramakrishna's eyes.

## Who Defines Hinduism?

Recent scholarship tends to conceive of the formation of modern Hinduism in polarized terms: either the English superimposed the (outsider) category of homogeneous Eurocentric religion onto a "family" of culturally similar traditions, or Hinduism is *sanatana dharma* (insider category), the ancestral storehouse of a wealth of culturally resonant myths and images, relationship with which (through such actions as storytelling, dance, *darshan* and *murti puja*) affects worshippers in transformative ways. The term *sanatana dharma* is, as we have seen, multivalent; I use it here to refer to the position that what we now call Hinduism has persisted through centuries as a religious entity with Vedic origins, but subject to continuous transformations, and not in the chauvinistic sense which modern Hindutva gives it.[32] **(**Van der Veer 994**;** Sugirtharajah 2003:53-54**,** Sharma 1993: 45-47)

A good example of consistency and change can be seen in the modern figure of Bharat Mata (Mother India) in relation to the goddesses Durga/ Kali, Sarasvati and Laksmi. When we consider her images in depth, we will see how sixth- or seventh-

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India…[W]orship is shaped by human ideas about honoring guests…If worship…is performed properly and does please the deities, they can be expected to respond by protecting the whole community…if worship is not performed properly so that the deities are displeased, they are likely to withdraw protection, causing distress and misery…" (Fuller 1992: 59-69)

[32] The term "*sanatana*" means "eternal," "ancient,"or "from of old." The term "*dharma*" means "law," "custom," "tradition," or simply "usage." [It] can also mean something like "ordinary religion," that is to say…the conventional practices of ritual behavior and duty to be expected from people as a result of their station in life in terms of family, occupation, region, and so forth. It is interesting to note that no Indian

century goddess iconography persists, but also contributes to graphic depictions of a twentieth century goddess. Is she the *same* goddess? The question recalls Wendy Doniger's story about the village carpenter's knife, said to have been in his family for generations. Over the years the blade has been replaced several times, as has the handle, but it is still the "same" knife. **(**Doniger 1998: 50**)** In conceiving of Hinduism's related strands as a family, one unifying and consistent theme is the presence of some form of the mother goddess. In Vaishnava and Shaivite traditions she is conceived of as the primary (male) deity's *shakti* ("power", or consort); in Shakta traditions she is supreme, the ground of being, the embodiment of power (*shakti)*, and the source from which her infinite manifestations emerge and into which they submerge. She is evident in some form, whether foregrounded or not, in virtually all strands of Hinduism. It is therefore not surprising that when a unifying symbol for modern Hinduism as a pan-Indian religion began to emerge from the national psyche, it proved to be the nonsectarian goddess Bharat Mata.

Specific deities aside, one of the markers for *sanatana dharma* is the worshipper's relationship to the deity as iconic or aniconic; either viewpoint can exist within a self-described *sanatani* perspective, but the holding of a clear position is itself significant. The majority position in contemporary Hinduism is pro-image, and unless I specify otherwise (as in the case of the Brahmo and Arya Samajes), I intend the reader to understand *sanatana dharma* to include image worship. With regard to the discourse of polarity introduced above, I claim that the lived reality of modern Hinduism may be more usefully conceived as a dialectical process, in which modern Hinduism emerged from

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language has a term for our English word "religion." The closest approximation to the English expression "Hindu religion" in an Indian language is "Hindu *dharma*."( Larson 1995: 82)

*sanatana dharma*'s complex encounters with colonialism.  In the next section I will review the broad outlines of the constructionist and the sanatanist positions in order to clarify differences between an outsider, text-based, "top-down" approach to Hinduism and an insider, demotic,  image-based approach.

## Constructionist and Sanatanist positions

The constructionist position, which has prevailed in the study of religion in recent decades, is primarily textual in its approach to Hinduism; it is also associated with a Western-normative, "outsider" orientation which sometimes reduces the very concept of religion to an academic abstraction.  The claim that Hinduism is simply a colonial construction emerged from the attempt by Western traders, merchants and missionaries to understand, in religious terms, the people they encountered in South Asia.

The sanatanist position, more "insider" and indigenous in its adherents, takes a flexible view of what constitutes a primary religious source, recognizing the efficacy of "folk" or grassroots practices, art, and performance.  This position accepts as religious the power of culturally resonant myths and visual symbols to act as governing ideas.  (Eliade 1991; Larson 1995 )  My intention is less to present these two as diametrical opposites, than to provide a context for my claim that deity images, specifically the mechanically reproduced images of "bazaar art," should be understood as agents of religious change and identity formation in modern Hinduism – as "visual texts" (Eck: 1999) in their own right.

## Hinduism as Colonial Construction

Brian K. Pennington characterizes the constructionist position as

> [the] claim that in scholarly practice the category Hinduism vacuums up a miscellany of Indic traditions, ideas, and communities that, at their core, have so little in common that their collective identity under this umbrella is at best misleading and at worst an exercise in ideological subterfuge. (Pennington 2005: 168*)*

The underlying assumption behind this line of reasoning is that, because there is no single set of teachings which can be put forward as being valid for all Hindus, there is in effect no Hinduism. If there is anything that can properly be called Hinduism, it is either a colonial construction or what Romila Thapar has called a "syndicated Hinduism," cobbled together to serve a nationalist political agenda. (Thapar 1992**)** Variations of this position have been articulated by a wide range of scholars in the academic study of religion. While agreeing in principle that the idea of a monolithic world religion called "Hinduism" radically misunderstands the case, some of these scholars (for example, Flood and Doniger) suggest models which may be best represented as a mosaic of related, but distinct religions coexisting for the most part peacefully in one area, connected through a sort of "family resemblance." [33] Others (such as King and von Stietencron) effectively deny the existence of any pre-colonial Indian religious system to which the term "Hinduism" can properly be applied.

Robert Frykenberg, a strong spokesman for this latter position, says vehemently:

[33] I take this term from Ludwig Wittgenstein's usage in *Philosophical Investigations*. Wittgenstein invites the reader to define "game", leading to the discovery that, while it is very difficult to arrive at a definite definition which will be true of all games, nevertheless, we can use the term meaningfully. Wittgenstein proposes that people are able to understand the concept "game" even without an absolute definition by using the analogy of family resemblance: members of a single family will have numerous common traits (eye color, body type, gait, facial structure, surnames and so on) which allow us to recognize them as related, even though all members do not share all traits. (Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1953/2001). Philosophical Investigations. Blackwell Publishing, 66-71) Similarly, I propose that we can speak meaningfully of "Hinduism" in the precolonial context to refer to the distinct but related sets of practices then extant.

> [T]here has never been any such thing as a single “Hinduism” or any single “Hindu community” for all of India. Nor, for that matter, can one find any such thing as a single “Hinduism” or “Hindu community” even for any one socio-cultural region of the continent. Furthermore, there has never been any one religion – nor even one system of religions – to which the term “Hindu” can accurately be applied. No one so-called religion, moreover, can lay exclusive claim to or be defined by the term “Hinduism.” The very notion of the existence of any single religious community by this name…has been falsely conceived. (Frykenberg, in Sontheimer and Kulke 2005: 29-49)

Wilfred Cantwell Smith adds:

> The term ‘Hinduism’ is…a particularly false conception, one that is conspicuously incompatible with any adequate understanding of the religious outlook of Hindus. Even the term ‘Hindu’ was unknown to the classical Hindus. ‘Hinduism’ as a concept they certainly did not have. And indeed one only has to reflect on the situation carefully to realize that it would necessarily have been quite meaningless to them…There are Hindus, but there is no Hinduism. (Smith 1991: 63,65)

Smith’s rejection of the term “Hinduism” is based in part on his explicitly stated principle that “no statement about a religion is valid unless it can be acknowledged by that religion’s believers” (Smith 1959:42)

However, as we have seen in the introduction, the term ‘Hindu’ *was* known to pre-colonial Hindus, although its meaning was never exclusively religious. Even for “Hinduism”, there exist examples of Indian usage[34] which problematize Cantwell-Smith’s assumption that the “concept they did not have.” Richard King considers it

> an anachronism to project the notion of ‘Hinduism’ as it is commonly understood into pre-colonial Indian history. Before the unification begun under imperial rule and consolidated by the Independence of 1947 it makes no sense to talk of an Indian ‘nation,’ nor of a religion called ‘Hinduism’ which might be taken to represent the belief system of the Hindu people… (King, 1999:177)

In a sense, of course, it is a truism to say that precolonial Indian people using the term ‘Hindu’ could not have meant or conceived it in the modern, Westernized sense; the

[34] such as Shivaji’s seventeenth-century *Hindavi Svarajya*, meaning self-rule (Sweetman, Sharma)

categories of thought are not commensurable. King here articulates the constructionist view that the Hindu identity “deployed by Indian nationalists to create an overarching cultural unity” (*Ibid.*, p. 26) was a “derivative discourse” based on Western, textualized interpretations of Hinduism as a world religion – a view which effectively erases indigenous claims for *sanatana dharma*.

## Textualism and its pitfalls

Doniger (2009), Sugirtharajah, (2008) Balagangadhara (1994**)** and King (1999) are among those who have attempted to problematize an overly text-based approach to Hinduism, proposing that, in privileging written sources, scholars risk overlooking important dimensions of lived religious experience while misconstruing or even misappropriating texts as sources of agency and power. King notes that

> Many of the early European translators of Indian texts were also Christian missionaries, who, in their translations and critical editions of Indian works, effectively constructed uniform texts and a homogenized written canon through the imposition of Western philological standards and presuppositions onto Indian materials. Thus the oral and ‘popular’ aspect of Indian religious tradition was either ignored or decried as evidence of the degradation of contemporary Hindu religion into superstitious practices that bore little or no relation to ‘their own’ texts…(King 1999: 101)

Below, I offer Von Stietencron’s argument about Shaivite conversion in medieval South India to illustrate the point that relying exclusively on printed texts viewed through a Western lens can lead scholars to wrong conclusions about Hindu religious material. Arguing from a carefully-selected written text, Von Stietencron claims that in medieval South India Shaivism and Vaisnavism were absolutely distinct religions unconnected by any “umbrella” of commonality. However, visual evidence from the same period reveals

a simultaneity of Shaivite and Vaisnava religious identities expressed in the "texts" of devotional images.

In his article "Religious Configurations in Pre-Muslim India" Von Stietencron essays to "[ascertain] the state of Hindu self-perception" (53) through the example of a priest's manual composed in the second half of the eleventh century in South India. This manual provides instructions for a ritual of conversion to Shaivism by non-Shaivites. He

> selected a text from a category of religious literature which was hardly affected by changing fashions, a text that was not concerned with erudite or polemic sectarian disputes over minute metaphysical differences,… a text that was not repeatedly revised, remodelled, and changed as, for example, most of the *Puranas*[35] were. The text is a *puja-paddahati*[36] : a manual for priests who officiate in the…rituals of their community. The very fact that it is not concerned with theoretical…issues but exclusively with the actual practice of religion in relation to…religious merit and demerit in everyday life makes this text a reliable witness for our purpose. Rituals may be abridged or slightly modified, but they rarely change in their essence…(von Stietencron 1995: 53)[37]

Von Stietencron chose a text which he believed to be a "reliable witness" to the lived experience of religion in medieval South India, partly because it described a ritual, which, in his view, was essentially a fixed quantity, and partly, perhaps, because this text seemed to support his conviction that "Hinduism" was a term with no referent . He argues that

> The 'Hindu' self-perception which [this text] reflects…is that of the Saiva community – and here it speaks with authority for all the orthodox *sampradayas*[38] of Saivism. It will be seen that Saivism is conceived of as an independent religion, and *not* as a part or sect of any larger entity which we might wish to call Hinduism. (*Ibid.*, p. 53)

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[35] *Purana* = old, ancient; oral or written repository of folklore (see Lipner 1994:146); authoritative in many folk traditions
[36] *puja*= (image) worship; *paddhati* = authoritative manual (Lipner 1994: 360)
[37] However, see Lipner: 84: "The fact that there are a number of ancient authoritative treatises on *dharma* (not to mention a great many *paddhatis*) shows that no one treatise had *unquestioned* authority, even in localised circumstances…"
[38] *sampradaya* = teaching, lineage or hermeneutic tradition/denomination (Lipner 1994: 360)

The *lingoddhara* ("conversion") ritual prepares the aspirant for initiation into Shaivism by, first, purifying his[39] soul of the "marks" (*linga*) of other practices. *Lingoddhara,* a theological term, refers to the removal of the *linga* or "sign" which establishes a person's religious identity, and which differs markedly for Buddhists, Vaishnavas, Shaivas, and members of other traditions. Members of a given community would conceive of themselves as having the same *linga*, produced by their common practices. *Linga,* here, does not refer to an outward marker such as a pendant around the neck or a distinctive style of dress;

> It is a mark invisibly fixed in the soul of a person…It is the spiritual impression made by birth and initiation… into a particular religious community …or merit acquired while following the spiritual path prescribed by that community. (*Ibid.*, p. 56)

*Linga*, then, is an identity marker which has to do both with personal practice and with communal identity. Conversion, von Stietencron emphasizes, is a serious business, requiring a firm conviction that the salvation obtainable through Shaivism is the loss of all previously acquired merit. He contends that

> [t]he 'Hindu' self-perception which [this text] reflects…is that of the Saiva community – and here it speaks with authority for all the orthodox *sampradayas* of Saivism. It will be seen that Saivism is conceived of as an independent religion, and *not* as a part or sect of any larger entity which we might wish to call Hinduism. (*Ibid.*, p. 53) …The modern notion of Hinduism as *one religion* does not correspond to the view of the medieval Saivas. Nor does it correspond to the view of the medieval Vaisnavas *if we closely examine their sacred texts. (68)* (italics mine)

[39] Since there is no evidence that women were able to participate in this ritual, I eschew inclusive pronouns.

Von Stietencron's claim that the *lingoddhara* sect in his text speaks for all orthodox[40] *sampradayas* (school-traditions) of Shaivism raises several questions not addressed by his article, and should be viewed with some suspicion. Did it, indeed, make that claim, or is this Von Stietencron's interpretation? By what authority did this sect claim to speak for all orthodox *sampradayas*, and exactly what, here, does "orthodox" mean? At this historical moment, were there "unorthodox" *sampradayas?* Even while contesting the notion that there is "something like "Hinduism" which unites Shaivism and Vaisnavism" (66), Von Stietencron speaks of medieval Shaivism as if it were a homogeneous pan-Indian entity, the very sort of entity whose existence he disputes. Might there not have been groups, self-identified as Shaiva, for whom the South Indian *lingoddhara* sect held no authority, or Shaivite *sampradayas* which shared beliefs or practices with Vaishnavas or Shaktas? Von Stietencron's implicit assumption is that if the answer to the latter is "yes," then those groups must have thought of themselves as sects of an overarching religion called Hinduism; or, if they did not so think of themselves, there could have been no such simultaneity of religious identities. The texts available to him did not challenge this assumption. For evidence to the contrary, we must turn to art history.

Visual evidence from the pre-Muslim period reveals a far more fluid understanding of sectarian identities than Von Stietencron realized, if not precisely "the modern notion of Hinduism as one religion." The syncretic deity Harihara, half Siva, half Vishnu, is said by Lawrence Briggs to have "made its first appearance in sculpture in the rock-temple of Badami in the Pallava country of Southeast India, which is dated 578

[40] "Orthodox" in Hindu thought usually means a system which reveres the Vedas, rather than "officially sanctioned by a recognized ecclesiastical authority" as in the Abrahamic traditions. Von Stietencron does

[CE]"**(**Briggs 1951: 232-233**).** Statues from seventh and eighth century Cambodia, Briggs' chief area of interest

> represent this deity with four arms and two distinct parts from head to foot-on the Siva side, the ascetic chignon, half the frontal eye, a simple belt around the waist, attributes of Siva in the two left hands; on the Vishnu side, hair dressed in a high cylindrical cone, cloth falling from waist to knees, with a fold in front, attributes of Vishnu on the two right hands. *(Ibid.*, p. 232)[41]

Julius Lipner cites another example of a Harihara temple in South India, roughly contemporary with Von Stietencron's text:

> The [Lingaraj Mahaprabhu] temple [in Bhubaneswar, Orissa] houses a block of stone eight feet in diameter …This stone is believed to possess particularly sacred powers as the *lingam* [iconographic sign] of the god Shiva and attracts many pilgrims from other parts of India…Between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries, Vaishnava influences became so strong that the temple was renamed the Lingaraj Mahaprabhu Temple. Lingaraj (king of the lingam) is an epithet of Shiva; Mahaprabhu (Most Powerful One) is an epithet of Vishnu-Krishna. The stone *lingam* itself is today called Harihara, a combination of Visnu (Hari) and Shiva (Hara). A natural cleavage in the *lingam* is said to mark its dual Shaiva-Vaishnava character. (Miller and Wertz, *Hindu Monastic Life: the Monks and Monasteries of Bhubaneswar*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal and London, 1976, cited in Lipner 1994:290).

Harihara also appears in popular nineteenth- and twentieth-century Indian "bazaar" posters, in two variants. One resembles Briggs' description, showing a body whose left side bears the iconographic marks of Vishnu while the right side is depicted with Siva's attributes. The other shows the two deities, accompanied by their respective *shaktis*[42] and mounted on their respective *vahanas* (animal vehicles), meeting in the center of the image so that the heads of Vishnu's elephant and Siva's tiger merge.

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not define his understanding of this term, and I suspect that his usage reflects Eurocentric assumptions.

[41] Similar statues from the eighth and ninth centuries are found in Osiyan, Rajasthan, where three Harihara temples still stand (www.indiasite.com/rajasthan/jodhpur/osiyan.html); other examples from this period can be seen in the British Museum.

[42] "Consort"; the feminine embodiment of power



**Figure 9 Harihara, 9th century, South India (Chicago Art Institute)**



**Figure 10 Harihara, lithograph, 1910s**

These pieces of visual evidence help to nuance Von Stietencron's contentions that "there is no  question of considering Shaivism and Vaisnavism as two sects of the same religion" and that the "modern notion of Hinduism as *one religion*" corresponds neither to medieval Vaishnava views nor to medieval Shaivite views.   In the Orissan example, the popular growth of Vaishnava devotionalism caused an existing Siva temple to reinvent its central focus of worship to reflect lived practice.  There is no evidence that the worshippers at the newly combined Vaishnava-Shaiva temple thought of themselves as "Hindus", still less that they thought in terms of "Hinduism" (which, as we have seen, is a nineteenth-century linguistic construction).  Still, the renaming of the central deity and the hermeneutic which explains the cleft in the stone as representing its dual Vaishnava-Shaiva nature suggest stongly that they thought in terms of simultaneous religious identities,[43]  and that the visual symbolically embraced both in a way not evident from purely textual study.

It is far beyond the scope of this project to settle the question of "Hindu self-perception" in eleventh-century South India, but one main point is clear.  Briggs, Miller and Wertz expand our field of inquiry by going beyond purely textual evidence and examining artistic representations found in devotional contexts.  Their data allow us to construct a hermeneutic of the visual which reveals a "simultaneity of religious identities" expressed in the sixth century statue, the eleventh century *linga*, and persisting into nineteenth and twentieth century poster art.  Even being mindful about "reading back" modern concepts such as Hinduism into precolonial contexts, we must  recognize

[43] See Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 418

the incorporation of Siva and Visnu, the primary deities of two (seemingly) distinct *sampradayas*, as parts of a larger whole. The images thus provide insight into a theological dimension of lived religious experience in medieval India which Von Stietencron could not attain through the study of written texts. I submit that this visual evidence for simultaneous religious identities provides valuable insight into the power of images in forming a modern Hindu religious identity which was capable of embracing multiple caste and sectarian identities.

## Hinduism as (Sanatana?) Dharma

As we have seen, Hinduism is both an object of academic scholarship and a religious identity. In the former discourse, the terms have largely been set by outsiders. Hindu academics who engage in such discussion have, for the most part, conducted their discourse through the foreign idiom of Western categories. However, it is a signal mistake to attribute any and all Hindu religious coherence to Western colonial influence. Indian categories of religion are different from Western categories, and the Western academy has yet to take Indian categories very seriously. In this project, I adopt the term *sanatana dharma* as one solution for talking about Hinduism as a self-defined category distinct from the "Hinduism" of colonial construction, and I claim that evidence of religious coherence can be "read" in Hindu iconography and its intertextual relationship with myth.

As we have noted, "The Hindus do have a name for their own religion – and it is *sanatana*[44] *dharma*" ("eternal, or old-time, religion") (Sharma 2005: 94) For Sharma, "*Dharma* is a key concept in the Hindu worldview, one with a deep cultural resonance" (*Ibid.,* p. 89), and *dharma* is the word most often translated into English as "religion," although views differ on whether the terms are really equivalent. **(**Sharma 1997**,** Chatterji 1940**)** In this section, we will discuss *sanatana dharma* as an organizing principle in Hindu traditions, in an effort to begin engaging our visual data on their own religious (or *dharmic)* terms. Kirin Narayan explains:

> *Dharma* means religion but also stands for duty, role, function, righteousness, and law. Deriving from the Sanskrit *dhri*, "to hold together," *dharma* is that which aligns the individual with the group and eventually the workings of the universe. (Narayan 1989: 34)

*Dharma*, then, has to do with relationship. The term is used at two levels: on the level of one's own location in life, and on the level of humanity in general. On the individual level, *sva-dharma,* personal *dharma*, denotes values specific to one's gender, stage of life, profession or social position; on the macro-level, it denotes universal values relating to concepts such as truth, nonviolence, and purity, which are common in one or another specific form to most religious traditions. *Adharma* indicates a lack of relationship to governing values: stealing is *adharmic*, as is seizing the government of someone else's country. The concept of a *dharma raja*, the king or ruler as agent or

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[44] According to Sharma, *sanatana's* meanings include : immemorial, as in "a religion that has come down to us from immemorial times"; old, in a sense similar to "classic": something so old that it is new; imperishable, as in an example of heroism that will stand for posterity even when the original heroic actors are dead; eternal, in the sense of containing endless potential ;eternal, in the sense of archetypal; Hinduism as a form of wisdom of which the various 'religions' are parts or exemplars eternal or perpetual (Sharma 2005: 105)

embodiment of *dharma*, runs deep in Indian culture. This concept proved a potent source of symbolism in the struggle for independence from the British, and found multiple representations in vernacular art. In chapter 4, we will see the important symbol of the *dharma raja* protecting his realm in the form of a cosmic cow who is, herself, an embodiment both of the kingdom and of *dharma*.

Late nineteenth and early twentieth century Hindus perceived *dharma* as under attack by colonialism, and intellectuals felt an imperative need both to protect traditional understandings of *dharma* and to re-define *dharma* in contemporary terms. In 1903 the Board of Trustees of the Central Hindu College, Benders, published a textbook entitled *Sanatana Dharma: An Advanced Text Book of Hindu Religion and Ethics,* which reads almost like a catechism, and which explicitly equates religion with *dharma*. Its Introduction states:

> The Religion based on the Vedas, the Sanatana Dharma, or Vaidika Dharma, is the oldest of living Religions, and stands unrivalled in the depth and splendor of its philosophy, while it yields to none in the purity of its ethical teaching, and in the flexibility and varied adaptation of its rites and ceremonies.
>
> Among others, the text provides the following definitions of *dharma* for the students' benefit :
>
> "That which supports, that which holds together the peoples (of the universe), that is Dharma." - *Mahabharata.* Karna Parva, lxix, 59.
>
> Dharma is not merely a set of beliefs… but it is the very principles of a healthy and beneficent life. [T]o know those principles and to act upon them is to be a true Aryan. (2)

Classical Hinduism recognizes four sources of *dharma*. These are *sruti* (revelation; often equated with the Vedas and Upanisads); *smrti* ("memory", or tradition; often associated with the Puranas and epics); *acara*, or exemplary conduct; and *atmatusti*,

or conscience. (Sharma 2005: 91). In seeking to determine *dharma,* that is to say, the correct action, in a particular situation

> one first considered Revelation. If no answer was forthcoming, one considered Tradition, then Acara, and finally took recourse to one's own conscience. Modern Hinduism has developed a …view of this scheme which gives the primary role to conscience…This is best exemplified by Mahatma Gandhi, who…openly declared that he would reject any scriptural command opposed to common sense and conscience. (*Ibid.*, pp. 91-92)

*Dharma*, then, is context-sensitive. The primacy of conscience over scripture in Gandhi's Hinduism-as-*sanatana dharma* represents a paradigm power shift towards the demotic. Sharma further illuminates this trend in modern Hinduism by referring to a famous episode in the *Mahabharata.* The *dharma-raja* Yudishthira finds himself in an ethical face-off with a yaksha, or semi-divine being, with his own brothers' lives hanging on his answer to the question, "What is *the* path?" Yudishthira replies that the *srutis* differ among themselves, as do the *smritis* and the sages; the only course is to "follow the path adopted by the *mahajana."* (Sharma 2001: 12) This advice has enormous resonance for the imagination of a modern Hindu identity through the print media.

*Mahajana* can mean either a great person, or a great number of persons. Thus, one reading is to follow the example set by an individual examplar; the second says that consensus, or public opinion, is the arbiter of *dharma*. (*Ibid.*, pp. 19-20) The force of the first reading is attested by late-nineteenth century representations of, for example, the *dharma- raja* Rama restored to his throne. The force of the second reading is attested in bazaar posters from the 1930s, depicting Gandhi and members of his Congress party as *dharma rajas* leading the masses or defending victims on the model of ancient epic heroes. At the same time, as we shall see in the next chapter, the print media provided a

space where the *mahajana*, in the sense of the public, engaged questions of *dharma* and modern Hindu identity as an "imagined community" in Benedict Anderson's sense.

From a *sanatani* perspective, Hinduism comprises three major *sampradayas* ("traditions" or "religious affiliations"[45]), each of which focuses (though not necessarily exclusively) on a particular deity. These are: Shaiva traditions, focused on Shiva; Vaishnava traditions, focused on Vishnu and his incarnations; and Shakta traditions, focused on the Goddess or Devi. [46] We have referred to them in passing, and have explored Von Stietencron's claim that they are perfectly independent religions incorrectly lumped together under a "deceptive" term. The *sanatani* position claims them as branches, in Lipner's metaphor, of the same "ancient banyan" tree;[47] and, as the visual data attest, there are many instances of simultaneous identity which embrace two or more of these "branches." In addition to the Harihara (Vishnu/Shiva) iconography, we find, especially in Maharashtra, numerous images of the three-faced deity Dattatreya, whose unusual features and associated mythology reveal him as incorporating Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva in one form. The four dogs who almost invariably accompany him are said to represent the four Vedas, asserting a common "root" for these three modes.

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[45] See Flood 2003, 16-17; Sugirtharajah 2003: x-xi

[46] Shaivism and Shaktism are thought by some scholars to have roots reaching back to the Indus valley civilization, although others consider the evidence inconclusive, based as it is on iconographic similarities rather than textual evidence **(**Flood 2003: 91, 204**)**

[47] The characteristic of the banyan is well known: from widespread branches it sends down aerial roots, many of which in time grow thick and strong to resemble individual tree-trunks, so that an ancient banyan looks like an intercollected collection of trees and branches in which the same life-sap flows: one yet many. Reputed to be over 200 years old, with a canopy about 4 acres in extent, the Great Banyan of Calcutta is a 'proliferating jungle', organically if attenuatedly one, as vigorous as ever, new branches and roots forever springing up or down as others wither away. The Great Banyan is not a bad symbol of Hinduism. Like the tree, Hinduism is an ancient collection of roots and branches, many indistinguishable one from the other, microcosmically polycentric, macrocosmically one, sharing the same regenerative life-sap, with a temporal foliage which covers most of human history… (Lipner, 1994: 5)



**Figure 11 Dattatreya, lithograph, ca 1910s**

Even more widespread are images of *ardhanarishvara*, the lord who is half-man, half-woman: these depict Shiva and Shakti in one half-male, half-female body.



**Figure 12 Ardhanarishvara, 1950s**

These and other visual examples bear witness to the longstanding imbrication of Hinduism's theistic traditions. That all of these strands pre-date any colonial presence in India by centuries is hardly open to question; the debatable point for scholars of religion is whether they meet criteria to be considered as forms of a religion called Hinduism, or, indeed, as religions at all. For most self-identified Hindus in the late colonial period, questions about whether their faith practices satisfied Western religious criteria had relatively little force. The working out of a Hindu identity in late-colonial India was conducted primarily as an insider debate about *sanatana dharma* and what constituted "real" Hinduism. As I will argue, this debate was engaged, on one level at least, through people's relation to images.

The position which I call *sanatani* claims that "Hinduism" as an analytic category and descriptive label is meaningful and reasonably corresponds to observed social and historical realities. Its authority for such a claim comes from oral and visual cultural tradition at least as much as from written texts, particularly when we recall that "texts" such as the puranas and epics were originally oral, not written, and that they were recited (or heard) rather than read by the majority of people into modern times. (Pandit Tigunait, lecture, August 2010**)** Episodes from the stories of Rama, Krishna, and the goddess Durga are performed and recited regularly, today, in both the villages and the towns, and they are painted and sculpted on walls throughout the subcontinent.. The itinerant storyteller, often a religious renunciate, is a venerable cultural figure. India's living oral tradition constitutes the cultural and religious bedrock of heritage which resonates behind the visual images, and it is integral to the understanding of *sanatani* Hinduism.

*Sanatani* Hinduism includes vernacular perspectives on religious practice such as we saw in the example of the Harihara temple whose Siva iconography was altered to reflect an emerging grassroots tradition. Further, it accepts the claim that the experience of our ordinary daily life does not exhaust reality. That is to say, there is a dimension of reality, not subject to falsification, whose experience is the goal of spiritual practice; such claims, the post-Eliadean Western academic study of religion has preferred to bracket out as "theology," or to dismiss as essentialism. This distinction goes not only to theological claims but to historical ones. When Western scholars claim that there was no "Hinduism" before the colonial period, they overlook or erase traditional Hindu understandings of its own past. Western concepts of time and chronology are linear, with historical events clearly demarcated and supported by concrete, preferably written,

evidence of uncontestable date. Hindu concepts of time and chronology are cyclical, and its historical tradition - the *itihasa-purana* – is built on oral tradition, including the two great epic poems, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, as well as the *puranas.*[48] Romila Thapar refers to the prevalent myths of the *itihasa-purana* tradition as "embedded history," (Thapar 1992: 138) and she states that

> The deepest layer of the embedded form is myth…The significance of myth to the historian lies more in its being the self-image of a given culture, expressing its social assumptions…(*Ibid.*, p. 140)

To the scholar of religion, myth is equally significant. Myth uses the past to explain the present; myth in this sense is meaning-making narrative (Thapar 1992; Lincoln 2002; Eliade 1991**)** Western scholars, vexed by the various meanings of "Hindu" and "Hinduism," and the consequent difficulty in "proving" the existence of something resembling a sense of Hindu religious identity before the nineteenth century, produce a narrative that says there was/is no such thing as Hinduism – that Hinduism is a myth in the sense of "nonsensical." We saw, above, von Stietencron's dismissal of the *puranas* as changing, unstable, and therefore inferior to a text such as his priestly manual; Thomas Macaulay's infamous *Minute of 2 February 1835 on Indian Education* ridicules *itihasa* literature for its

> History, abounding with kings thirty feet high, and reigns thirty thousand years long,--and Geography, made up of seas of treacle and seas of butter.
> .

[48] *Itihasa*, meaning "that's how it was", denotes the genre of "just-so stories"; *purana* refers to "ancient stories." The *Mahabharata* is a text of mixed genres, while the *Ramayana*, which has multiple regional versions, is primarily poetry. (See Hiltebeitel, "India's Epics," in Sharma 2003:122-123)

The issue of agency is critical when we consider myth as sacred history. Who tells the story? Whose voice is silenced? What is the source of authority to be heard or not, to frame the narrative or to hear it?

The British colonial/missionary myth of the rational, benevolent, morally superior Christian nation civilizing the backward, superstitious, politically incompetent natives was powerfully challenged and ultimately overcome by a countermyth. Drawing on the pool of what Thapar calls "civilizational symbols", personified in the warrrior/nurturing figure of the great goddess, the *mahajana*, consisting of Indian nationalist leaders, the vernacular press, traditional storytellers and the popular imagination, all contributed to the development of a culturally resonant narrative of Indians as intelligent, resourceful, and powerful, as well as spiritually superior to the Europeans.

Imbricated with this process was the myth, or the "imagining," of a modern identity which envisioned Hinduism as *sanatana dharma*, a religiocultural tradition with an ancient and honorable past whose events and agents were the subjects of the *itihasa* literature, and the myth of the mother goddess Kali/Durga who sets things straight when *dharma* is threatened. For cultural insiders, popular images bearing an intertextual relationship with *itihasa* easily awoke associations to its stories. It is my claim that, for late-colonial Hindus, such stories evoked a sense of collective agency in the face of foreign domination, while the images served as linking devices for the "governing idea" of Hinduism as a venerable and viable tradition.

Not all scholars who defend the category of Hinduism venture into the realm of myth in its defense; by including the following scholars under the broad category of *sanatana dharma*, I risk accusations of oversimplifying, or of attributing views to them

which they may not in fact hold. The difficulty is that to organize arguments about Hinduism into “constructionist and non-constructionist” is to fall into a Eurocentrism that sees the world in terms of “the West and the rest”, and to allow Western academicians to determine the terms of discourse. That said, versions of what I am calling the *sanatani* position have been articulated by David Lorenzen and Will Sweetman, Julius Lipner, Wendy Doniger and Gavin Flood, all of whom present some argument for a pre-colonial sense of Hinduism grounded in shared Indian cultures, texts such as the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *puranas*, and indigenous self-understanding. While acknowledging the modern sense of “Hinduism” as a nineteenth-century occurrence, Flood

> take[s] the view that “Hinduism” is not purely the construction of western orientalists attempting to make sense of the plurality of religious phenomena within the vast geographical area of south Asia, as some scholars have maintained, but that “Hinduism” is also a development of Hindu understanding; a transformation in the modern world of themes already present. (Flood, 2003)

Thus, we arrive at a position which perhaps best describes “the way it was”: modern Hinduism, although unquestionably rooted in venerable tradition, was as unquestionably shaped by the colonial encounter. Without the irritant of Western colonialism and the threat of Christian conversion, modern Hinduism might have imagined itself very differently. It would be equally mistaken, I maintain, categorically to dismiss Hinduism as a “falsely conceived category” and to insist, with Swami Dayananda, that “the Vedas alone are the true authority in the ascertainment of true religion…absolutely free from error” (Richards 1985:52). Modern Hinduism involved, as Flood says, a transformation of themes already present, but its constituent elements and relationships occurred in a specific historical context: colonialism, for good or ill, was one of its agents. I will argue, in subsequent chapters, that Western aesthetic values

and print technology contributed in essential ways to the "imagination" of a pan-Indian Hindu religious identity; but I argue just as vehemently for a demonstrably venerable indigenous genealogy for that identity.

## Conclusion

During the nineteenth century a transformation occurred in Indian consciousness of religion as a category, and of what it meant to be Hindu. This transformation was colored by Western colonial influence, which, by its efforts to define Hinduism in Eurocentric terms, provided the necessary friction to prompt an internal self-assessment. The "insider" process of re-imagining Hinduism drew on existing perceptions of common religious ground amongst communities, recast certain elements of practice and tradition in new ways, foregrounded some and backgrounded others according to the needs of the times.

Clearly, there is no simple and, possibly, no adequate response to questions about what Hinduism is, who is a Hindu, whether the category of religion can rightly be applied to it, and whether academic outsiders should continue to talk about Hinduism as a religion even if insiders do not. The academic position which reduces Hinduism to a nineteenth-century colonial construction, and the opposite position which represents Hinduism as an eternal source of wisdom and the wellspring of all human civilization and spiritual value, owing nothing of importance to European influence, are both exaggerations of a far more complex reality. The nuances of lived practice, for the people who identify themselves as Hindus, lie somewhere in the middle. It is, perhaps, unnecessarily fussy on the academy's part to insist on problematizing such widely

accepted terms as “Hindu” and “Hinduism”,  particularly when they are defended by their insider end-users.

A great many people today, inside and outside of India, not only call themselves Hindus but speak unhesitatingly about “Hinduism” as an umbrella term for particular Indian religious systems.  Scholars of religion might do well, as Sharma and others have suggested, to find a term of discourse which carries less Orientalist baggage, but this one serves.  Whoever “constructed” it,  the power to retain it lies now with those people who choose it as an identity marker.  If the concepts and terms “Hindu” and “Hinduism” were originally foreign grafts onto the body of India – and it is by no means established that they were -  those grafts have now taken, and from here on in this project I will treat them as self-explanatory.  In the next chapter, we will consider the nineteenth century print medium as a public space in which modern Hinduism began to be “imagined” as a religious identity,  and the role of images as central terms and linking devices in this discussion..

# CHAPTER II

## *DHARMA* AND IMAGINED RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN AN AGE OF MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION

### Introduction

By the 1830s in India printing technology, initially the purview of European missionaries and government officials, came into Indian hands. Vernacular newspapers, journals, and books began to be reproduced in multiple copies; educational initiatives for women and other non-elite groups created the beginnings of a mass reading public, where literacy had been the domain of upper-caste men. Even more important to this project's exploration of the role of vernacular images in Hindu identity formation, religious lithographs and oleographs became available in India for mass circulation. Cheap prints and calendars, readily available in the bazaar, were affordable even to the poor to decorate the walls of their homes or places of work. As an art form "universally accessible regardless of wealth and class", mass prints had a profound impact on Indian society. (Mitter 1994:174) Before the advent of massproduced prints, few Indians possessed this sort of visual representation of their deities. Now anyone, including people denied entrance to temple worship on the basis of caste or gender, could worship their chosen deity when and as they chose. **(**Smith, in Babb & Wadley 1995)

This democratization was supported not only by purchased prints, but by the free, brightly colored advertisements of "trade labels" designed by Glasgow and Manchester cotton merchants for the Indian market. These images, depicting figures and events from

the *puranas* and epics, as Jain argues, "forge[d] an Indian cultural identity" (Jain 2007: 126) by generating, from the existing cultural pool, a common visual vocabulary for models of *dharmic* behavior, resistance to tyranny, and the concept of women as heroic, maternal, spiritual culture bearers, even as discourses upon these same themes appeared in the public space of the vernacular press. Many of these these *puranic* trade images survived their original commerical purpose to be displayed as objects of devotion (Cooper 1996**).** These might be framed or simply fixed to the wall, as observed by the Rev. J.E. Padfield of the Church Missionary Society, who commented (ca. 1888) on "the glaring labels from the Manchester cotton goods that one sometimes sees adorning the walls or doors or shutters" of native homes near Madras. (Pinney 2004: 17)

An anonymous colleague of Rev. Padfield's believed that, as artifacts of soon-to-be-defunct Hinduism, popular religious lithographs "have great value. As authentic representations of their gods by Hindus they mark a fast fading phase in the religious history of the country…" (*Ibid*., p.39) However, rather than signaling Hinduism's imminent demise, lithographs were to play a key role in rethinking Hindu identity. They had one enormous advantage over any print language: in a country where there were literally hundreds of vernacular languages and dozens of alphabets, images communicated directly, across class, caste, and linguistic lines. [49]

[49] India today has twenty-two officially recognized languages, and some two thousand dialects (http://www.webindia123.com/india/people/language htm) written in a variety of alphabets. The 2001 census, which counted as literate **"**a person aged seven and above, who can both read and write with understanding in any language", reported a national literacy rate of 64.64, 75.26 for males and 53. 67 for females **(**http://india.gov.id/knowindia/literacy.php); in 1881 the reported literacy rate was 3.2% (Nayaka and Nurullah 1974: 161). The colonial era saw the rise of an educated urban elite, almost exclusively men, who could read and write English as well as one or more of the Indian languages, but the vast majority of people neither read, wrote nor understood any language beyond the local or regional level. Thus, images had a clear advantage over the printed word in conveying ideas and values to a broad, multilingual and multicultural population, and in affirming the value of unity in diversity.

India possesses a rich common heritage of culturally resonant “civilizational symbols” in the form of visual images, *itihasa* (epic poems, such as *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*), *puranas* (religious narratives centered around a particular deity) and myths, all intertextually related. (Thapar 1992, Doniger 2009) Before the rise of print culture in the nineteenth century, this heritage circulated primarily through oral traditions such as plays, storytelling, and song, and through the viewing of temple images. The appeal of plays, songs and storytelling were, of course, somewhat limited to audiences who understood the performers’ languages, although the plots and characters would have been familiar even to participants who did not understand the dialog. The printed word in India was used initially in support of European missionary and colonial projects, but by the 1830s cheaply produced books and newspapers began to be produced by and for an indigenous reading public. These print media were a forum for public discourse on the meaning of modern *dharma* and what it meant to live as a “real” Hindu under colonial rule. *Sanatana dharma* is a religion of praxis rather than doctrine; the great question for Hindus in the late colonial period was what to *do*, how to act in concert with *dharma,* in a moment in time when traditional civilization and its symbols were under attack.

By the 1880s, lithography came into Indian hands and “native” art presses were established. These began to produce brightly colored images of deities and mythological subjects which, by virtue of their cheapness and portability, quickly became ubiquitous. Their presence in people’s homes contributed to the “imagination” of a new kind of religious communal identity, in the sense that Benedict Anderson speaks of an “imagined” national community. (I discuss Anderson and this concept in more detail following p. 28.) In their minds, people could picture themselves as one of an unseen

community of people who displayed copies of a chosen image, and they could, if they liked, synchronize their worship of that image with the other devotees. [50]

As Krishna, in *puranic* mythology, appeared simultaneously to hundreds of devotees wherever they were, now multiple viewers in multiple locations could "take *darshan*" of the same image at the same time. Moreover, the circumstances governing the worship of a paper image in the home were far more flexible than the rules governing formal worship of a dedicated *murti* (statue) in a temple setting: the image itself did not require a priest to install it, as would be necessary in a temple, and any member of the household could have free access to the image at any time. For lower-caste people, this flexibility could allow access to a deity with whom interaction in a temple setting would be prohibited. (see Babb and Wadley: 70) As Smith puts it,

> [C]ontemporary India has witnessed what might be termed a new and pervasive "omnipraxy," as exemplified by the shopkeepers and taxi drivers who daily offer flowers and incense to framed pictures of deities before whom they stand simultaneously as… priest and as devotee; or the unmarried women, bachelors, widows and widowers…who pay homage to garlanded portraits of *istadevatas*[51]…or the housewives and the infirm who do *yatra* (pilgrimage) to distant sites all the while remaining stationary in front of a pilgrimage map. As a popular art genre, the poster gods have fostered a democratic devotionalism, a populist piety, of extraordinary proportions in the present age. (Smith, in Babb and Wadley 1995: 36)

Printed deity pictures thus presented unprecedented opportunities for religious agency by individual devotees. Such agency was particularly significant for women and lower-caste men, who could not act in public as religious specialists and who were

[50] Because prints are widely available, cheap, or occasionally even free, almost anyone can afford to own any print he or she wishes. This may facilitate more private worship in the home and less at the temple. It perhaps also has contributed to the growth of particular cults, whose momentum often relies on a shared talisman or other symbol…(Inglis, in Babb and Wadley, 70)

[51] "chosen deity". See Sharma 1993, pp 45-46, on Hinduism as the religious counterpart of a democracy in which "you choose your own representatives of the divine."

routinely denied entry to many temples, and for the poor or infirm, who were unable to undertake real-world pilgrimages as members of a faith community. The simultaneous viewing of the deity by a large number of people, once possible only in the public space of a temple or procession, could now take place "virtually," in multiple locations. Stephen Inglis suggests that

> Visualizing the deities through popular depictions links not only virtually all markets, temples and pilgrimage places in India, but also Hindu residences, workplaces, shops and places of worship throughout the world…The ubiquity, portability, and mobility of these images have drawn Hindus closer to one another in the ways they perceive the divine and have provided a more unified vision of the Hindu pantheon. Printed pictures are thus one key element in the "Pan-Hinduism" that develops as Indians become increasingly mobile within their own countries and find themselves part of regionally diverse Hindu communities abroad…" (Inglis, in Babb and Wadley 1995: 67)

Printed pictures and photographs also served as the media for individual expressions of "visual theology." Devotees could group images together in non-traditional ways, creating "alliances" between deities not usually associated with one another.[52] Such groupings made implicit statements about the owner's theological choices or preferences. When Ramakrishna visited Nanda's home, he commented on Nanda's choice of goddess images. The text makes it clear that Nanda had more, and more prominently displayed, pictures of the goddess than of other deities; and these pictures were displayed differently than Nanda's English pictures. A devotee might choose to add a picture of his *guru* or of some cultural hero to his display of god-pictures, indicating a spiritual connection, at least in his own mind, between the deity and that person. The image below consists of a photographic postcard glued onto a piece of hand-

[52] Such alliances were not new phenomena, as we saw in the example of the eleventh-century Hari-hara images in chapter 1; what was unprecedented was the ease with which devotees could create and represent their own choices of alliance.

cut paper which serves as a mat; this in turn is glued onto a piece of cardboard printed to represent a picture frame. The postcard shows a statue of Krishna playing his flute; the English caption reads “Murlidhar,” Krishna’s epithet as flute-player. Under the photograph someone has handwritten “Shri Murlidhar” (Lord Krishna-the-flute-player) in Devanagari characters. Centered above the photograph is a small portrait , in a medium resembling newsprint, of a man wearing glasses and a turban; this image is flanked by the handwritten caption “Srivaidh Shastriji”. It is, of course, impossible to know who Srivaidh Shastriji was – possibly a teacher, or the donor of the postcard - but for someone, he was closely enough associated with this image of Murlidhar Krishna to warrant the inclusion of his likeness in this homemade *murti*.




**Figure 13 Krishna Murlidhar and Shrivaidh Shastriji**

On another level, artists and publishers could produce pictures which combined images of deities with images of prominent public figures, or even depict public figures as deities. The following image, probably circa 1950, shows Gandhi, his wife Kasturba, Sarojini Naidu, Subhas Chandra Bose, Bal Tilak, and Mevlana Azad, all nationalist icons,

being received into Heaven by saints and deities while the Hindu pantheon of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva look on. This image is particularly noteworthy due to the presence of Mevlana Azad, a Muslim, in what is clearly a Hindu heaven. Although it is beyond the scope of this project, a study of what "happens" when particular deities and heroic cultural figures are assembled together in home shrines or in images would certainly add a new dimension to the study of Hindu religious identity and devotionalism (see Smith, in Babb and Wadley 1995: 41)




**Figure 14 Gandhiji and Nationalist Heros in Heaven**

Printing is often regarded, at least by Europeans, as one of Europe's many technological contributions to Indian culture, along with such modern conveniences as railroads, dams, and telephones. In the sanatanist spirit of challenging unquestioned Euronormativity, we must note that the art of transferring images and letters to paper by

means of a block or stamp was an Asian invention. Marco Polo introduced printing and paper from China to Europe in the thirteenth century. Printing by means of moveable type reached India in the very late seventeenth century at the hands of European missionaries and colonial officials, but Indians soon made it their own. By the nineteenth century Indian-owned lithographic presses were producing both books and lithographic religious images which provided a cultural infrastructure for an emerging sense of Hinduism as a broad-based, devotionally-oriented "religion of the people." (Dalmia 1997).

In 1855 James Long, an Irish missionary who had arrived in Calcutta nine years earlier, issued a *Descriptive Catalogue of Bengali Works* listing 1400 titles published in the previous sixty years, with the comment: "Popular Literature is an Index to the State of the Popular mind." (Chatterjee 1995) The largest category, by far, was "Scriptures & mythologies," representing 44.25% of all books published between 1801-1817 and 18.26% of those published between 1844-1852. (*Ibid.*, p. 39) From the mid-century on, journals appeared in which

> [t]he new intellectual elite sought to demarcate a cultural zone that would be regulated by normative practices laid down and enforced by institutions *set up and run by the dominant practitioners of that culture, not by an external colonial government.* (italics mine) (Chatterjee 1995:54)

This new elite, composed largely of literate, urban, uppercaste men, formed the ranks of reformist organizations known as *dharma sabhas* ("religious organizations") and *samajes* ("societies"). The idea of *sanatana dharma*, always fluid through the ages, began in the nineteenth century to cohere around such groups. For generations, the *dharma sabhas* had mediated between the precepts of Brahmanic law (*dharmasastra)*

and actual contingency, sometimes in the service of the colonial project, but in the nineteenth century they began to operate without, or even against, government authority (Dalmia, p 2). Their shared goal and function was to mediate and sanction change while preserving inherited practice and tradition, and in so doing, to assert Hinduism's spiritual unity. Their spokesmen turned to the print media to defend against missionary invective, to protest legislation which they perceived as threatening to religious freedom, and to work out questions of legal and ritual procedure in a world where the traditional practices of *dharma* seemed to be at risk.

Art historian Kajri Jain articulates the sense of social ferment and mission which drove the reformers and the Indian reading public at large, in the years following the abortive "Indian Mutiny" and the British crown's annexation of India:

> In the last decades of the nineteenth century, after the uprisings of 1857 that saw the consolidation of British rule in India, writers, thinkers and activists across the country were engaged in intense reflections on – and performative descriptions of – difference and identity: racial, civilizational, religious, caste, ethnic, linguistic. These were expressed in books and articles…taking the form of histories, religious and philosophical tracts, polemical essays,…retelling of epic or *pauranic* narratives,…plays, poems, novels, stories, and …combinations of any and all of the above. A great deal of energy was focused during this period on articulating the essential characteristics of Hinduism or Hindu "civilization": in Bengal for instance by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, then Ramakrishna and Vivekananda; in Maharashtra by Chiplunkar,[53] then Tilak; and in the northern Hindi belt through the debates between the Arya Samaj reformists led by Dayanand Saraswati and the traditionalist image- worshipping followers of "orthodox" Hinduism or *sanatana dharma*…[[I]n many of these identitarian and reformist writings…religion became the primary site for "cultural" identity formation. (Jain 2007:98)

In Banaras, the journalist and *dharma sabha* member Bharatendu Harischandra used his publications to affirm the value of image worship and to promote Vaishnavism

[53] Vishnu Krishna Chiplunkar, founder (1878) of the Chitrashala Press, Pune, known for its nationalist and populist publications

as "the only real religion of the Hindus" (Dalmia 1995). Reader inquiries to the Calcutta newspaper *Samacar Candrika* (founded in 1822 by *dharma sabha* members) about such unforeseen contingencies as a woman priest installing a lingam, or the proper funeral rites for a guru of the untouchable caste, reveal a deep, underlying sense of disjunct between the way things were supposed to be and the way things now were, and to the need for unprecedented flexibility in *dharma*. As religion became the primary site for "cultural" identity formation, people turned for guidance to the civilizational symbols embodied in scripture and mythology, also known as the indigenous category *itihasa*. The forum for the presentation of these symbols, in word and image, was the new mass print culture.

## Mythic Narrative and "Mytho-pictures"

As we have seen, religious studies scholars such as Wendy Doniger and Bruce Lincoln propose that we understand myth as meaning-making narrative, a kind of symbolic action with unavoidably political implications. From this perspective, myth offers a way to make sense of a world or a circumstance which does not seem to make sense. At this historical moment in India, when people sought solutions to the problems posed by living under British domination, the most compelling solutions were framed in the mytho-religious terms embodied in the *itihasa* and *puranas.* Thanks to the budding print industry, the reading public had unprecedented access to this literature and its civilizational symbols through mechanically reproduced words and pictures.[54] Tapati Guha-Thakurta coined the term "Hindu Mytho-pictures" for the religio-historical

[54] The "New Books" column of Calcutta's *Samacar darpan* for 23 July 1825 reports that "with the introduction of the printing press" studies on astrology, Smriti, logic and the Puranas have revived, and that "This is a cause of much satisfaction among the people." (in Chatterjee 1995:35)

“Hindoo” lithographs produced by the Calcutta School of Art from 1877 onwards in a style “halfway between ‘art’ and icons” (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 101). These popular visual representations of mythological events supported the construction of a narrative in which modern Hinduism “imagined” its present and future identity based on the coherent and meaningful past.

The ability to understand current events in the light of *itihasa* promoted cultural confidence in a future in which *dharma* would prevail over *adharma* and order would be restored, as it was in the mythic narratives of Rama regaining his throne or Durga conquering the buffalo demon. The collective imagining of modern Hindu *dharma* was, in a sense, a new narrative about a time when the world had been in balance under the rulership of a righteous king. Then, in this myth, something bad occurs: demons or foreign powers disrupt the kingdom, rendering its rulers powerless and enslaving the people. Order is restored by a divine intervention which overcomes the forces of chaos and re-orients people’s awareness towards traditional practices and values, and by the people’s collective action in service of those values. Significantly for this project, the most ubiquitous of such narratives involves the goddess Durga/Kali, who is both a warrior and a nurturing mother, and her victory over demonic forces who upset the cosmic balance and threatened *dharma.*

With India subservient to a foreign colonial power, two of the great public questions were: how did we come to this pass? And: what actions must we take to restore our lost state of righteousness and agency? These simultaneously religious and cultural questions were addressed through print culture. The relevant narratives, immediately recognizable to the masses, were everywhere referenced through the “mytho-pictures”

which appeared on trade labels, matchboxes, and cigarette wrappers as well as in books and lithographs; by the turn of the century, everywhere people looked, they saw examples of *dharmic* behavior prevailing.

The December 25, 1890 issue of the *Civil and Military Gazette*, Lahore, printed this impassioned plea from a reader, in the form of a prayer to the goddess:

> O Mother, behold, we are fallen. We have been deprived of our old martial spirit. Thy sons are now a pack of arrant cowards, trampled under the shoes of the *Mlecchas*,[55] and so dispirited as to lose all sense when angrily stared at by them. Thou art power perfected. How canst thou tolerate such emasculation of thy dear sons? O, Mother, take pity on India, and infuse the timid souls of thy children with the force of thy invincible power. (cited in Oman, 1907)

In the latter half of the nineteenth century in India, as Tapati Roy notes,

> The new intellectual elite sought to demarcate a cultural zone that would be regulated by normative practices laid down and enforced by institutions set up and run by the dominant practitioners of that culture, not by an external colonial government. (Roy, in Chatterjee 1995)

This "cultural zone" and its practices were largely coextensive with the mythological imagery and references which formed the *lingua franca* of India's pan-national identity. Romila Thapar characterizes as "civilizational symbols" such images as the swastika which "embodies the auspicious" for Hindus, Buddhists and Jains in the subcontinent. The *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana,* examples of *itihasa* often claimed as Vaishnava religious literature, are, in her view, civilizational symbols. These epics originated as the carriers of ethical traditions; historically, they were used by various religious sects at particular times to propagate their particular ethics or for political

[55] foreigners; impure people

legitimation. (Thapar 1992: 70) [56] These civilizational symbols were the subject matter of the literature described in Long's catalog as "an index to the state of the popular mind" and of the emerging genre of mythopictures.

As a culture, India possesses a rich heritage of images which resonate with oral, largely religious, traditions known to virtually everyone from childhood; they contain what Wendy Doniger has referred to as "the religious scuttlebutt" of all Hindus. (Doniger 1991) In Diana Eck's words, "The images and myths of the Hindu imagination constitute a basic cultural vocabulary and a common idiom of discourse." (Eck 1998: 17) This "common idiom" constitutes a sort of mythic vocabulary about *dharmic* behavior, embodied in figures such as the chaste and loyal Sita enduring captivity, the goddess Durga defeating demons, historical women such as the Rani of Jhansi and Ahilyabai Holkar fighting heroically to protect their kingdoms and families, goddess Lakshmi bringing prosperity, Ganesha with his elephant's head and massive trunk destroying obstacles, Arjuna on the battlefield agonizing over his true duty, the good son Shravan carrying his blind parents on his back to perform their religious pilgrimage, and the cow, venerated from ancient times as a the embodiment of nonviolence and selfless nurturing. (Flood 2003: 125; Sharma 1993: 41-42), as a symbol of *dharma* itself on a pan-Indian level. I suggest that mass produced images embodying this basic cultural vocabulary both reflected and shaped the public discourse on *dharma* and modern religious identity, through their ability to communicate across linguistic and regional lines. Data on the

[56] Thapar goes on to consider the use of these symbols by politically-motivated modern Hindu fundamentalist groups to construct what she calls a "syndicated Hinduism," which seeks to dominate and write out other religions by establishing a jingoistically "Hindu" India. Her point is well taken, but it is not the point I wish to pursue in this project. I borrow her concept of civilizational symbols only to support my thesis that the dissemination of such symbols through the print media contributed to the "imagination" of a cohesive Hindu religious identity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. To follow her

sales and marketing of late nineteenth-century images is virtually nonexistent, but H. Daniel Smith (1995) has commented on the evidence from modern publishers' sales records of the diffusion of specific cults, such as

> …the goddess Santoshi Ma, whose popularity as a "poster deity" beyond Hindi-speaking areas is obvious; the god Ayyappan, whose marketability beyond a certain radius of his primary shrine in Kerala is likewise striking; and the goddess Vaishno Devi, whose immediate recognition outside a limited range beyond her primary shrine in Jammu in recent years is also telling. (Smith, in Babb and Wadley 1995: 31)

In Stephen Inglis' view,

> Visualizing the deities through popular depictions links not only virtually all markets, temples, and pilgrimage places in India, but also Hindu residences, workplaces, shops, and places of worship throughout the world…Printed pictures are…one key element in the "Pan-Hinduism" that develops as Indians become increasingly mobile within their own country and find themselves part of regionally diverse Hindu communities abroad… (Inglis, in Babb & Wadley 1995: 67)

The following image published by the Ravi Vaishav Press, circa 1910, is one early example of an imagined universalist Hindu community. Inscriptions appear within the image, but the message does not depend on the viewer's being able to read all, or any, of the words. We see a cow who contains in her body the sun, the moon, mountains, a lake, and numerous Hindu deities; she is meant to embody India as cosmic home and mother to all her inhabitants. A Devanagari caption identifies her as *Kamadhenu,* the "wish-fulfilling cow" of Puranic myth, coextensive with the earth and with *dharma* itself. On the image's right stands a sword-wielding demonic figure, but a yellow-clad figure, labelled "*dharma raj,"* intervenes his body between Kamadhenu and the assassin, saying: "Don't kill the cow, everyone is dependent on her." (Pinney 2004:109)

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argument about contemporary abuses of such symbols would be to stray far beyond the bounds of the project I have in mind.

Below Kamadhenu's belly is a group of seated men. They are labeled, respectively: Hindu, Parsi, and Saheb, but even if we could not read we could tell from their physical postures and accoutrements what communities they belong to. The Englishman sits on an upturned box, wears a top hat and tails,and holds out a cup with a saucer; the Parsi squats, wearing shoes and holding a rimless vessel. He is clean-shaven except for a mustache, and wears the cone-shaped hat characteristic of his community's men at that time. The Hindus squat barefoot, holding out round drinking vessels and wearing rounded hats on their heads and caste marks on their brows. A Gujerati caption above the Parsi's head asks: "Give me milk" in the language of his community; the Saheb asks the same thing in English. An unlabelled Muslim, identifiable by his turban and beard, proffers a rimless bowl which a Hindu man, wearing the dhoti and turban of a farmer, fills with milk. Above the cow's back, a Brahmin priest, identifiable by his sacred thread, *dhoti* and caste mark, raises his hands and recites Sanskrit *shlokas*. This picture graphically represents the idea of an all-encompassing but undeniably Hindu motherly entity which nurtures all her children, even the foreigner, equally; and which (therefore?) deserves the protection of all from menacing forces. The first line of defense "on the ground" is, of course, the *dharma raja*, the righteous ruler, while the Brahmin invokes the sacred power of Vedic Sanskrit, above.

The community in this picture is defined by Hindu values of generosity, inclusivity, protection of the defenseless, a concern for *dharma*, and the numinous power of sacred language; all of this is conveyed at a glance in a cheap, flimsy color print by an unknown artist, from a small indigenous press. Although this picture contains words in three different scripts and four languages, they are not absolutely essential to the

meaning.  Any nineteenth-century Hindu, whether or not he could read any of the scripts, would recognize Kamadhenu and understand the picture’s import.  Although this picture evokes deep-rooted cultural symbols, it is not an illustration of any single mythological episode, such as the images of Durga defeating the buffalo demon.  The image itself may be considered a “text,” or narrative, in that it makes claims about the brotherhood of India’s major religious communities and about the “body” of the goddess/cow as all-inclusive.  Also, significantly, this image sounds the theme of “protecting the mother” which , as we will see, is taken up by other images and forms an important strand of religious and nationalist narrative.

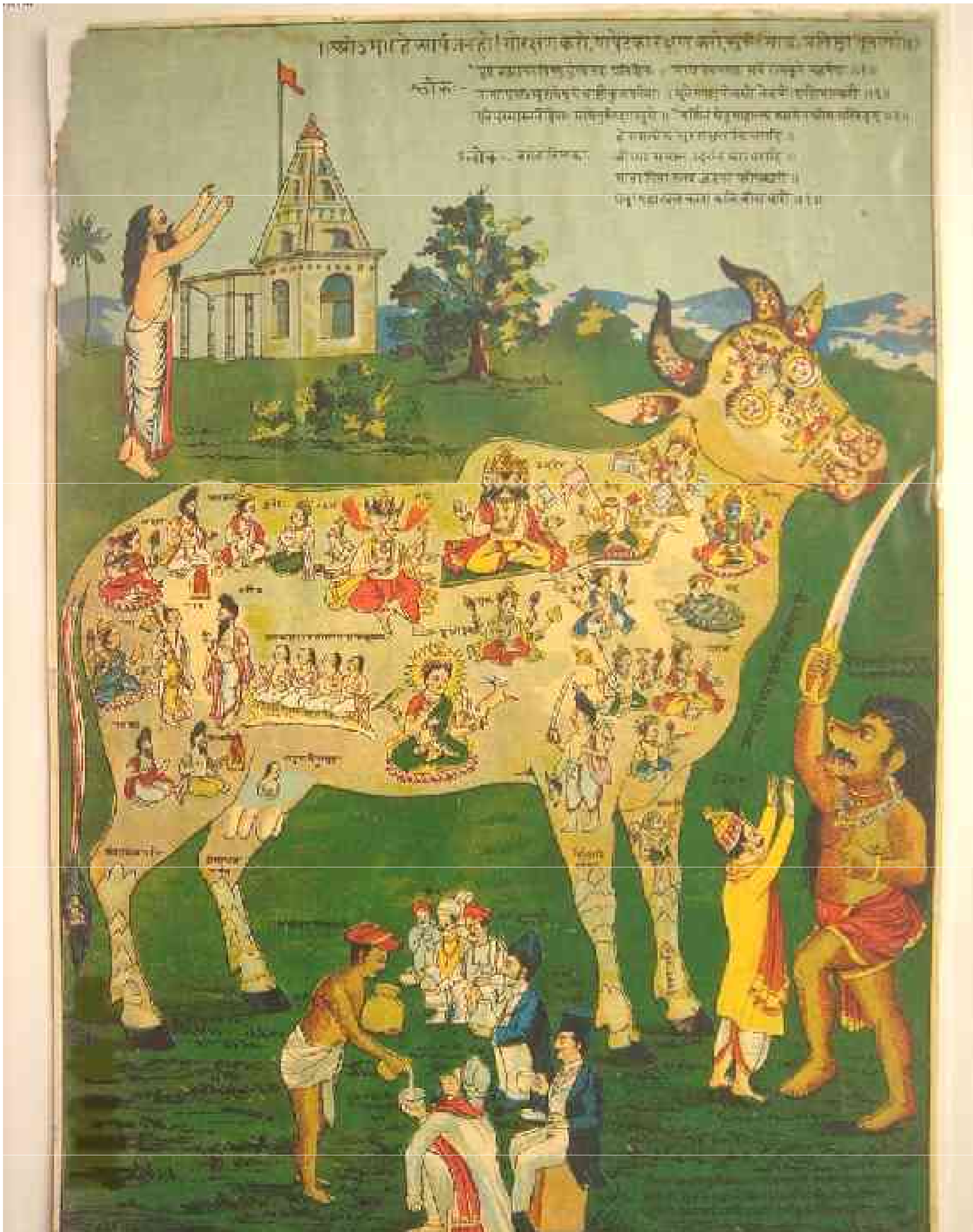


**Figure 15 Kamadhenu nourishes all communities**

As we saw in the poster of the divine cow Kamadhenu, the idea of a "Hindu" nation depicted there did not exclude or devalue Muslims,[57] Christians, or Parsis, neither did it expect them to renounce their own ethnic or religious identities in order to receive nourishment. They do not have to do anything to qualify as her sons; the goddess' body and her bounty are all-encompassing. The concept of physical territory as body of the goddess is even more graphically depicted in "divine cartography" images such as the following.[58]

[57] My project, being concerned with visual images and Hindu identity formation, largely ignores important developments in the Indian Muslim community, which produced its own discourses of freedom and its own genre of visual identity markers. Debates in both communities about how to formulate and maintain viable modern religious identities in the face of colonial domination occurred in public and in print.
[58] See Ramaswamy, "Body Politics," in Davis 2007: 32-50




**Figure 16 Matr Bhumi, Bharat Mata as Mother Earth**

Although Kamadhenu's body contains geographical features, it is by no means a map of any actual territory. Even as colonial map-makers sought to define India in terms of geographic boundaries, from at least 1909 Indian artists were producing images of a goddess commonly identified as Bharat Mata, Mother India, of whom we will have much

more to say in later chapters.  As in this label from a Bombay cloth manufacturer, circa 1930s,  her body, flowing hair, and billowing draperies mark out the cartographic countours of the Indian subcontinent.  The Devanagari inscription identifies her as "Matr Bhumi," "mother earth."  Her upper right hand holds a red lotus, associating her with Lakshmi, goddess of prosperity; the lower right makes the classic gesture for *abhaya*, "fear not." Her lower left hand makes the gesture of giving or boon-bestowing, while the upper left holds a trident, associated both with Shiva and with warrior goddesses; here the trident serves as the supporting pole for a prototypical nationalist flag bearing Gandhi's emblem of a spinning wheel. The flag notwithstanding,  I would argue that Matr Bhumi has far more in common with Hindu civilizational symbols of Earth as goddess than she does with, say, the American political icon Uncle Sam, and that she is a religious figure, rooted in *itihasa*.  In her, religious and nationalist symbols are so mutually imbricated as to be inextricable; she simply embodies a modern vision of Hindu *dharma*.  That vision of *dharma* had been a century or more in the making, as these excerpts from the nineteenth century popular press attest.

## *Dharma*, the printed word, and the "real religion of the Hindus"

The collective "imagining" of a Hindu identity in late-colonial India emerged, in large part, from debates within a Hindu public about *dharmic* questions raised by the need to engage with and defend against colonial hegemony through the consolidation and protection of traditional values.  Hindu religious identity furnished a central organizing principle around which resistance could cohere, in a process, ongoing since Vedic times, of continuous revelation**:** that is, the continual reinvention of *sanatana dharma* to meet

historical contingencies, and the view that *sanatana dharma* offers perennial solutions to contemporary problems. (Sharma 2005:101) As we noted above, representatives of the *dharma sabhas* and *samajes*, whose role it was to mediate the particulars of *dharma* in new contexts, both contributed to and edited most of the vernacular news media. Some examples from the popular presses, below, illustrate the pervasiveness of religion throughout Hindu culture, and ways in which the reading public engaged the print media to "imagine" certain values as central to modern Hindu religious identity. Issues of caste, gender, and education intersected with questions of proper *dharmic* practices (including image worship) in many of these publications.

As we have seen, in Banaras the journalist and *dharma sabha* member Bharatendu Harischandra advocated in his various publications for Vaishnavism, with its strong devotionalism and privileging of image worship, as "the only real religion of the Hindus". In 1873 he published an editorial on "why love (*bhakti)* is greater than *jnana* (knowledge, wisdom)," weighing in on a theological controversy at least as old as Tulsidas' *Ramcharitmanas*.[59] Harischandra extended the concept of *jnana* to include western technical and scientific knowledge, his point being that the very wonder of the created world revealed by scientific understanding must eventually lead to knowledge of, and love for, the Creator. Reason, he argued, was no more than a mechanism for generating love in the devotee's heart; no logic suffices to prove the power of love, therefore *bhakti* was unfalsifiable. From this it followed that image worship (*murti puja*), being grounded in *bhakti,* was superior to to Western claims for the rational religion and iconoclasm favored by many Hindu reformers (Dalmia 371-372).

Brian K. Pennington reports a reader's inquiry submitted in 1830 to Calcutta's *Samacar Candrika* on an unprecedented problem raised by the government's promotion of low-caste education, which had made Sanksrit learning available to non-Brahmans. The writer, a member of the medical *vaidya* caste, had lost his *guru*. He and his brother disciples, all *vaidyas* and *brahmans*, were seeking the correct formula for their teacher's funeral rites. The problem was that, since their late *guru* was a low-caste *shudra*, they could discover no precedent in the ritual laws for how they, as upper-caste men, were to conduct a funeral for a lower-caste teacher. The editor responded: "We are publishing this letter as it is, but we have serious doubts about a shudra with brahman and vaidya disciples." Other readers expressed outrage and disbelief, with one insisting that the letter must be a hoax since such a situation was unimaginable. (Pennington 2005: 151-152)

Another *Candrika* reader, claiming to be a student at Hindu College, wrote in the same year to warn others that deceit and trickery were the true motives of missionary education. He complained:

> It is very unfortunate that they tried to convert us, thinking that because we were training with them they could turn the sons of Hindus into Christians. Since we were innocent babies, our parents have taught us about the gods, brahmans, daily worship, and the concepts of karma and dharma. Don't these people know we are already formed in our own culture from birth? (*Ibid.*, p. 159)

That culture, however, was undergoing radical changes which challenged existing categories of caste (as in the case of the untouchable *guru*) and gender in relation to religious practice. In 1871 the journal *Kavivachansudha* reported that its editor, Harischandra, had been called upon to mediate a dispute regarding the appropriateness of

[59] Tulsi Das (1532-1623) was a philosopher and *bhakti* poet whose devotional practice centered on Ram.

a woman's installing a *lingam* (aniconic representation of Shiva) in Nepal. The installation had been approved by one local religious authority but was contested by others who, after consulting the relevant scriptures, concluded that such an installation was disallowed.[60] The maharajah of the city refused to agree to anything until Harischandra gave an opinion, after which the local *sabhha* would debate the matter and reach consensus. (Dalmia 1999: 357-358) Sadly, neither Harischandra's nor the *sabha*'s final decision is recorded. The case illuminates several aspects of Hindu identity in process: first, the written evidence of a woman ritual specialist in the nineteenth century is relatively rare, although no doubt women did act in this capacity, and there do exist a very few graphic images of women *sadhus* or *yoginis*. Second, it is striking that the proposed installation was so controversial as to stymie the local specialists; and, third, that Harischandra, who was after all a writer rather than a religious specialist, should be chosen to break the religious impasse suggests the vernacular press' power to shape a modern understanding of *dharma* and religious values.

Questions of *dharma* informed people's responses to Western medical interventions during the 1896 plague epidemic in Bombay Presidency. Traditional Indian medicine is rooted in religious tradition, both Hindu (*ayurveda*) and Muslim (*Unani*). The vernacular presses were as one in criticizing the government Plague Act, which mandated the isolation of suspected plague cases in government hospitals, for "interfer[ing] so largely and in such a systematic way with the domestic, social and religious habits of the

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[60] While there are in fact no actual prohibitions against women acting as *pujaris*, custom has long militated against it. The Arya Samaj's insistence (dates) on Vedic precedent for educating and initiating women in Sanskrit ritual was hotly contested in its day. Upasani Maharaj of Sakori, Maharashtra, took the radical step in 1920 of training the *kanyas*, or nuns, at his ashram to perform Vedic ceremonies, thereby establishing a precedent for initiating women priests in Maharashtra. However, women *pujaris* remain remarkable and newsworthy nearly a century later.

people" (*Mahratta*, December 1896; in Arnold 1993: 212). The editor of a Sholapur paper demanded the appointment of women doctors, protesting: "Native ladies will prefer death to the humiliation of having their groins examined by male doctors who are utter strangers to them." (*Kalpataru*, October 1897; in Arnold 1993: 214)

For the Hindu (and, to a great extent, the Muslim) public, values of personal and ritual purity were at stake: these included women's chastity, the dangers of caste-mixing, and the problem of being required to eat "impure" food from suspect sources in a government hospital. Quarantined patients, often removed bodily and involuntarily from their homes, were cut off both from their families and from the solace of prayers and rituals for the sick and dying. (Arnold 1993**)** Such attitudes frustrated British administrators, for whom medicine and religion were noncommensurate categories, and who dismissed as superstition those indigenous medical practices which were coterminous with religious practices. [61]

Implicit in much of this public discourse was a concern with *stri dharma*, "women's dharma".[62] The popular press mirrors public concerns about women, their bodies, their place in modern society, and their representation as the bearers of *sanatana dharma*. In its pages, women tend to be presented as objects of concern, not agents of change. The few women's journals extant at this time confined themselves largely to issues of education and modern homemaking rather than questions of public health or religious authority. Among the most contentious public discourses were those on *sati* (widow burning) and child marriage. In 1829 and again in 1891, Hindu reformers made

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[61] See Arnold 1993 for an account of a long-established, successful, indigenous smallpox treatment as incoporated into the worship of the goddess Mariamma.

common cause with the colonial government to ban the practice of widows immolating themselves on their husbands' pyres and, sixty years later, to raise the age of consent for married girls to twelve. Both decisions aroused public fervor; orthodox papers invoked the *shastras* to oppose government interference in religious life (Sarkar 2001: 226 ff; Pennington 2005**),** while reformers passionately argued against *sati* and for the Age of Consent bill.[63] It is probably no coincidence that lithographic images of Sita's "trial by fire" in the *Ramayana* were widely circulated from the mid-century on in counterpoint to the "suttee" images circulated in the European press. Both images show a woman engulfed, or about to be engulfed, by flames; however, where the European images are intended to arouse horror at Hindu practices, the Sita images affirm her as a heroine of *dharma* – and in her story, she emerges unscathed from the flames. In the lithograph below, we see Agni, god of fire, emerging to protect her.

[62] A full discussion of these important issues exceeds the scope of this project, but we cannot ignore them completely here. We shall revisit issues of women's representation in relation to images of the goddess.
[63] In Bengal, Rammohan Roy's crusade against *sati* led to the founding of the first Indian-run newspapers (Bayly 2007: 29) while later reformist papers such as the *Bengalee* (1891) publicly denounced marital rape and abuse. (Sarkar 2001: 238)



**Figure 17 Sita trial by fire, 1890s**

The press' role as an arbiter of *dharma* in the case of the woman installing a lingam highlights one intersection in the print media of the discourses on gender, religious authority, and *murti puja* (image worship). Art historian Partha Mitter, commenting on the print media's role as cultural mediator, says:

> The impact of print technology on modern Indian nationalism has received the attention of a number of scholars (Dasgupta 1977; Bagal 1964; Ray 1979; Seal 1968). Less known until recently is the role of visual imagery in forming this common culture – 'an imagined community' that shared a common and easily understood visual language which affirmed common values and aspirations. (in Ramaswamy, 5)

Still less appreciated is the contribution of visual imagery to the construction of a pan-Indian sense of religious community. We have already seen how the reading public employed the public forum of the new print media to "imagine" trans-local values for a trans-local Hindu community. This is not to say that the print media gave rise in the first instance to the notion of a pan-Indian religious identity; rather, they were a means by which an existing, perhaps somewhat inchoate, sense of *dharma* was articulated, as in the discussions of widow burning, the woman religious specialist, or the proper funeral rites for the low-caste *guru*. In the next section we will consider Benedict Anderson's concept of nation as "imagined community" as a model for the imagining of a cohesive Hindu religious identity. Anderson's model focuses on the print-medium of newspapers; however, its principle of a sense of deep, horizontal fellowship amongst unknown reading companions applies equally to the end-users of printed images engaged in what June McDaniel calls "photo-bhakti."

“Imagined Communities”

Benedict Anderson famously conceived of nations as “imagined communities,” whose emergence in Europe, from the late seventeenth century through the end of World War II,  was aligned historically with the decline of two cultural systems which he terms the *religious community* and the *dynastic realm.* (Anderson 1983:12)  He offers that the nation

> is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. (Anderson 1983: 6)

The nation, for Anderson, is also imagined as *limited*, because it has finite boundaries: “No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind.” It is imagined as *sovereign* because the concept emerged at the historical moment between the two World Wars in Europe when the ideal of secularism supplanted the concept of divine kingship. Finally, the nation is imagined as a “*community,* because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each,  the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.”(*Ibid*., p. 7)

Anderson argues that the possibility of imagining the nation came into being when “three fundamental cultural conceptions…lost their axiomatic grip” on Europe’s consciousness.  The first was the idea of  a sacred “particular script-language” inextricably linked to ontological truth.  The second was the idea of society as hierarchically organized under a monarch who ruled by some sort of divine dispensation. The third was a concept of time in which cosmology and history were “indistinguishable, the origins of the world and of men essentially identical.” (*Ibid.,* p. 36)  These losses, Anderson argues, precipitated a search for

> a new way of linking fraternity, power and time meaningfully together. Nothing perhaps more precipitated this search, nor made it more fruitful, than print-capitalism, which made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways. *(Ibid.*)

Anderson's theory has been criticized by for its Eurocentrism and its failure to consider either historical conditions or existential categories in third world countries such as India. (Chatterjee 1991, Desai 2009**)** Although the conditions Anderson describes for Europe do not all fit late-colonial India, the model remains useful.[64] Anderson's model illuminates our understanding of Hindu religious identity formation through three key concepts: simultaneity, linking, and "print-capitalism." By the last, he means that a printed book was "the first modern-style mass-produced industrial commodity," an "object in itself," unlike a bushel of apples or a sack of sugar, which are just quantities. Anderson argues that the standardization of national calendars, clocks and language came together in the publication of daily newspapers, which are like books except for the ephemeral nature of their relevance. The newspaper's impending obsolence at the time of its purchase creates

> [t]his extraordinary mass ceremony: the almost precisely simultaneous consumption ('imagining') of the newspaper…The significance of this mass ceremony – Hegel observed that newspapers served modern man as a substitute for morning prayers – is paradoxical…Each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion… At the same time, the newspaper reader, observing

[64] As Desai notes, "secularism" in Nehru's India took on an entirely new character, which did not erase the cultural ideal of divine kingship. The ideal of the *dharma raja* persisted side by side with the vision of a modern state guided by traditional values. That vision found expression in popular prints representing episodes from the *itihasa* literature: Lord Rama in exile, Rama regaining his throne, Arjuna and Krishna in battle, and, above all, the powerful figure of the warrior/mother goddess Durga/Kali/Mother India, restoring cosmic order for the sake of, and with the help of, all her "children." A sense of "deep, horizontal relationship" between communities is evident in nineteenth-century images of the maternal cow, who nourishes members of different religious communities, even the British, with her milk, but who must be protected, as we saw, by the dharma-raja.

> exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbors, is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life…(Anderson 1991)

The newspaper, then, serves as a quasi-religious linking device for the imagined national community, through the mechanisms of simultaneity and mechanical reproduction. Everyone knows that he or she is reading the same paper at the same time; and, significantly, in the same language. I suggest that bazaar images of deities served as linking devices for an imagined *religious* community. People who possessed copies of the same deity images could easily envision the ceremony of *puja*, or "photo-bhakti", being replicated simultaneously by others, with the chosen details of ceremony (choice of flowers or incense, for example) or image (Durga in battle, Durga as benevolent mother) further contributing to a sense of solidarity. **(**McDaniel 2006, Smith 1995, Ingalls 1995**)**

## The dynamics of devotionalism

H. Daniel Smith speaks of modern Hindu

> "omnipraxy," as exemplified by the shopkeepers and taxi drivers who daily offer flowers and incense to framed pictures of deities before whom they stand simultaneously as priest and devotee…As a popular art genre, the poster gods have fostered…a populist piety of extraordinary proportions…Yet, very little of the dynamics of this devotionalism has been reported. Who knows the exact ritual – if, indeed, there is an "exact" ritual - performed by devotees such as taxi drivers before the framed pictures or decals of the deities on their dashboards? (Larson et al 1997:22)

The question arises, whether a sense of community depends on knowing the "exact ritual" performed by others? In Anderson's example, newspaper readers derived a sense of community from seeing "exact replicas" of their own papers being read ("consumed") by others. Here, the action of simultaneous reading through the linking

device of the newspaper creates a sense of community amongst newspaper readers, heightened in Anderson's model by the fact that they are all reading in the same vernacular language. Smith's "omnipraxy" speaks of a comparable simultaneity occurring in the practice of *murti puja,* although he does not explicitly associate his concept of populist piety with imagined community. Smith focuses on the action of performing ritual through the linking device of "poster gods," leaving open the question of precisely what the ritual entails. There are at least three ways in which simultaneity might operate in the home performance of *murti puja*: there is the simultaneity of time, in which devotees pray at the same time, though not necessarily to the same images; there is the simultaneity of devotional object, in which devotees address their prayers to the same images, or at any rate to the same deities; and there is, as we saw in the last chapter, a simultaneity of religious identity, as in the devotees who worship both Shiva and Vishnu in one image. An important variation on simultaneous religious identity appears in a devotee's choice of several deities, grouped in particular ways, who may be worshiped at the same time.

Although one may worship an image at any time, certain times of day are primary, particularly early morning, around sunrise, noon, and evening, around sunset. Such times are known as *sandhya*, "twilight," because they represent the juncture of two time periods such as night and morning, morning and afternoon, or day and night. *Puja* generally involves, at a minimum, the offering of flowers and water, the burning of incense, and the repetition of prayers or mantras; in a formal setting this process may be quite elaborate, while

> domestic worship…is individualistic and highly variable. In almost every religious Hindu's home there is a shrine for *puja* or at least sacred drawings or

> pictures to evoke an atmosphere. A cupboard, recess, or even a room, may be set aside for pictures of the deity. Sometimes the divine representations are highly eclectic…but the underlying belief is the same: the Godhead is one but manifests itself in various ways. (Lipner 1994: 282)

The precise details of devotional behavior vary with regard to the worshipper's class, caste, occupation, and gender, and with the *ishta devata* ("chosen deity").[65] However, the following passages from the 1903 *Sanatana Dharma: An Advanced Text Book of Hindu Religion and Ethics,* published by the Board of Trustees of the Central Hindu College, Benares, bear witness to a concern with systematizing the elements of worship. Two elements support the awareness of acting in community: common printed insturctions, and simultaneous performance at designated times (*sandhyas*, the morning and evening twilights.)

> The simplest form of worship is that… in which an image representing some divine Form is used as the Object…; flowers are used, as…symbols of …love and reverence; water is sanctified with a mantra, poured on the image, and sprinkled over the worshipper; a mantra, in which the name of the Object of worship occurs, is repeated inaudibly a certain number of times…It is the teaching of the ancient Rishis that at Sandhyas there is always a special manifestation of force which vanishes when the Sandhya is past…" (Besant 1903, 212-216)

Thus, the idea of a Hindu community linked by its "imagination" of simultaneous worship reflects Anderson's model for the "exact replication" of the newspaper-reading ceremony with certain differences. The above passages indicate that the Board of the Central Hindu College were intentionally seeking to codify and homogenize a "deep, horizontal" sense of Hindu religiosity, and that they privileged both standardization and simultaneity of worship in the service of that aim.

[65] For example, Shiva prefers white flowers, Kali hibiscus; Ganesha enjoys sweets and dairy products; their respective devotees would attempt to include such elements in their *pujas*.

Two factors are often overlooked about the print media's influence in India, a country which is multilingual but, historically, orally and visually rather than textually oriented. First, there is India's long-established oral tradition. This is well illustrated in the ethnography *Storytellers, Saints and Scoundrels*, when Kirin Narayan focuses on the oral performance of story as a linking device for several levels of cultural meaning:[66]

> When Swamiji tells stories he is involved in an informal cultural performance..[H]is folk narratives are connected historically and geographically, through texts and performances, to other versions. When he tells portions of the *Mahabharata*…his rendition is one link in a chain of oral storytelling by *sadhus*, professional storytellers, *pandits* and lay people. It is also related to dance or drama productions of the story…to Sanskrit, vernacular, and English texts; to paintings and posters; and possibly even to a television production or two… (Narayan 1989: 35-36)

Swamiji, Narayan's family *guru*, is a living repository of civilizational symbols, mythological narrative, and spiritual practices. In telling stories, he serves as a relaying station in which all of this material intersects with a particular audience. As Narayan notes, his stories are connected to other printed, oral, and visual versions of the same stories; his particular instance of the telling is a link in a long chain of narrators and narrations, and he may articulate the connections by referring to a particular, image, storyteller, or text. His hearers' simultaneous experience of his performance connects them, as a community, with the other hearers in the room; they may be the only people ever to have heard this particular version of the story from Swamiji's lips, and future shared recollection of this telling may forge a further link amongst them. Thus, this one instance of storytelling creates an "imagined" community encompassing the original

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[66] Wendy Doniger observes that "[I]ntertextuality… argues for the inclusion of [numerous miscellaneous sects] under the rubric of Hinduism. The fact that later texts and practices often quote earlier ones, right back to the *Rg Veda*, allows us to call it a single tradition… The individual artist composing a text or

tellers of the story, the characters in the story, Swamiji, his hearers, and any number of other narrators, images, or instances of this story or these characters which Swamiji may invoke, or which his hearers may recall from their own experiences or bring into their future interactions with one another.

The fact that many Indians in the late colonial period were unable to read or write even their own first language problematizes Anderson's privileging of the printed word as a linking device.[67] With the advent of newspapers and journals, the storyteller's role expanded to include reading aloud to an audience. The "reading public" thus included people who could not read, but who participated in a mediated newspaper-reading ceremony, similar to Swamiji's "cultural performance," simultaneously with other non-readers. (Roy, in Chatterjee 1995: 46) Anderson's model of simultaneity consisting of many people reading the same paper at the same time thus must expand to accommodate this second order of "reading".

Second, there is India's tradition of visual "texts"in the form of temple sculptures, coupled with the ability of easily portable, mechanically reproduced visual images to disseminate narratives and theologies across linguistic lines. We have noted the example of the eleventh-century Hari-Hara sculpture as evidence of simultaneous religious identitities in Southern India, and we will consider other evidence from sculpture in the next chapter. The following episode from Mahatma Gandhi's autobiography reveals the intertextual relationship between printed word, printed image, and civilizational symbol.

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performing a ritual can make innovations, but she demonstrates first her knowledge of the traditions of the past and only then her ability to build upon them…" (Doniger 25-26)

[67] Statistics on literacy in the precolonial and early colonial periods are scanty or nonexistent. Literacy rates in British India are reported to have risen from 3.2 per cent in 1881 to 7.2 per cent in 1931 and 12.2 per cent in 1947; this figure is not broken down by caste or gender .(Naik: 2000)

In *My Experiments with Truth*, Gandhi tells how the symbol of the mythological "good son" Shravana resonated in his imagination as a child in Gujerat in the 1870s. His father had a book telling the story of Shravana's devotion to his parents. The child Gandhi

> [r]ead it with intense interest. There came to our place about the same time itinerant showmen. One of the pictures I was shown was of Shravana carrying, by means of slings fitted for his shoulders, his blind parents on a pilgrimage. The book and the picture left an indelible impression on my mind. 'Here is an example for you to copy,' I said to myself…(Gandhi, 1957)

Viewed through the lens of simultaneity, we see that the book, the actors and the picture served as linking devices connecting Gandhi with a wider community. His experiences of reading the story, encountering the performers, and viewing the printed picture of Shravana together broadened his awareness of the mythological past as relevant to his present and future. In a discussion of procession, mythological performance and storytelling in India, Sandria Freitag speaks of the transformative meaning-making which can occur when one attends a public mythological performance and then views a mytho-picture linked to that performance, as Gandhi appears to have done[68]. The viewer's gaze is "mobilized" by the chronological and physical proximity of viewer, performers and performance in public space. Simultaneity of this sort permits the viewer to "move" from present to past and back to the present, from self to story back to self, and to "transfer from the live enactments to single images an entire "packet" of meaning." The viewer carries that meaning with him to be re-mobilized when, at home, his gaze meets a poster on the wall whose symbols recall the mythological performance. (Freitag, in Davis 2007: 95-97) The intertextual relationship between the printed image,

[68] Gandhi does not mention attending a performance, only being shown the picture by the performers; however, even if he only read the story and did not see a performance of it, the effect on him of the picture seems to have been similar to the process Freitag describes.

the performance, and the viewer's own consciousness bring a richness of meaning to the experience of viewing the poster, linking the viewer imaginatively with a wider community, past and present, as the symbol of Shravana did for Gandhi.

Such transformative meaning-making links the act of viewing with consciousness of the mythological past. In Eliadean-phenomenological terms, even the simple act of viewing a mytho-picture can transform the picture into a *tirtha* ("ford") which allows the viewer access to other dimensions of consciousness. Through the image, he finds himself linked to the common ground of cultural symbols and religious significance, to past experiences of such connection, and to a community of other viewers with similar connections.

## Bharat Mata, Calcutta, and the "New Indian Art"

The most powerful linking device and cultural symbol of all, in the imagination of a unified Hindu religious and national identity, proved to be the goddess Bharat Mata. Two main narratives linking the mythological past with the present and future emerged in the print media of the nineteenth century. One was the narrative of the *dharma raja* Ram, a symbol of sovereignty lost and regained; the other was Mother India, Bharat Mata, whose body was the subcontinent, all of whose inhabitants were represented as her children, as we saw in the examples of Kamadhenu and Bhumi Matr. Bharat Mata's iconography associate her not only with the earth and the cow as maternal symbols, but with the warrior goddess Kali/ Durga, with the goddess of wealth Lakshmi, and with the goddess of wisdom and learning, Sarasvati. We will explore this iconography in more detail in chapter 4.

Bharat Mata emerged from Calcutta, which was not only the seat of colonial power in India, but the epicenter of devotion to the fierce mother-goddess Kali and the locus of the nineteenth-century "Bengali renaissance". Art historian Pratapadiya Pal notes:

> ..[O]ne might say that the Bengali Kali's popularity in India increased with the ascendancy of British political power, even though her form [69] was "revolting" to most pro-Westerners.(Larson et. al. 1997: 33)

In 1882 the novelist Bankim Chandra Chatterjee presented a theophany of Bharat Mata in his novel *Anandamath*, a thinly historical account of Indians banding together to protect their "mother" from foreign exploitation. In this novel she appears "at once as a symbol of the degradation of the society under alien rule and a reservoir of unlimited power." (Choudhuri 1979, cited in McDermott 2003: 184) Abandrinath Tagore painted her in 1905 as a young, saffron-clad woman with four arms, holding a book, a sheaf of grain, a *mala* (rosary) and a white cloth, posed against an indeterminate background, in a style which was groundbreaking for its time.

Calcutta, home of the Tagore family and the Calcutta Art Studio, was the proving ground for a revolutionary aesthetic which transcended old categories of European "high art" and Indian "folk" art, and the major clearing house for pictures produced by a new breed of artists. (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 126 ff) These artists brought their training in the values and techniques of European classical art, such as using tone and shade to add dimension, or modelling anatomically realistic faces and figures, to "native" subjects. Indigenous art historians sought to rescue Indian art and aesthetics from exclusively Western conceptions of "fine art" to include practical craftsmanship, and to define an

authentically Indian art, an endeavor which was intimately connected with the development of a Hindu religious identity through the medium of mechanically reproduced, inexpensive lithographed deity images.

According to Guha-Thakurta,

> [In 1854 the editors of *The Hindu Patriot* called for its readers to consider] what would be the effect of a body of artists with high conceptions and a refined taste modelling the idols we worship. (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 127)

The effect proved to be a religious, political, and cultural transformation of Hindu identity. The need for an authentically Indian regeneration and progress was an important motif in the books which began to appear on Indian art as well as in the subject matter of the art itself. Formal art education in India was part and parcel of the colonial project; it

> [b]ore the burden of refining "native" tastes, and given that Europe was seen as representing the pinnacle of achievement in fine art, this meant instructing Indian students in the naturalist techniques of Western "fine art." (Jain 2007: 95)

Art which was European in composition, technique and, largely, in subject counted as "high art"; art reflecting an Indian aesthetic, using indigenous production techniques and subjects, was pejoratively labled as "bazaar art". Christopher Pinney notes that in establishing government art schools in India, the colonial government

> …hoped that new techniques of representation could be instilled that would facilitate a broader dismantling of the Hindu worldview. Perspective would necessarily make the gods less real…for the mythic realm they inhabited would be unable to bear the scrutiny of linear perspective and its mathematical certainty…However…[p]erspective and the conventions of realism…made them more present. (Pinney 2004:66)

[69] Kali is most popularly depicted wreathed with skulls, half-naked, exulting on the battlefield surrounded by carnage.

"High" and "bazaar" art found their meeting ground in the lithograph or color print. (Beckerlegge 2008:218; Guha-Thakurta 1990:152) The Calcutta Art Studio's press, founded in 1878 to meet the portraiture needs of "the Gentry and the Nobility", soon derived its main source of income from highly colored lithographs known as "Hindu Mytho-Pictures." (Guha-Thakurta 1992) These images, which included both iconic, frontal renderings of deities and naturalistic depictions of episodes from the *Puranas* and epics, were so competitive with indigenous woodblocks and scroll paintings in popularity, availability and price as to replace the earlier works completely. European techniques of modelling, shading, and anatomical drawing gave the deities greater material reality than they had ever had in carved or blockprinted representations.[70] As James Long reported "scriptures & mythologies" to represent the largest category of printed books in the early nineteenth century, now

> Religious and mythological pictures, of the type popularised by the Calcutta Art Studio…constituted the most important category of popular, commercial art…Though the main appeal of these religious and mythological pictures lay in their handling of traditional Indian themes, their new status relied largely on the extent to which they appropriated the conventions of Western Academic Realism…(Guha-Thakurta 1992 97-99)

Although the Calcutta Art Studio's lithographs "carried the stamp of art-school training and the Western Academic style" (*Ibid.,* p. 95), the use of color in these pictures departed sharply from European naturalist conventions, producing bright-blue Krishnas, bottle-green Ramas, blood-red and marigold- yellow clothing set against vividly colored

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[70] Lithography, invented in Germany in 1798, reached Calcutta in the 1820s. The new technology permitted fast, cheap reproduction of both books and images on a large scale, compared with hand copying or printing by wood blocks. Early images, called "god photos," were imported from Germany and distributed by Indian presses; so strongly did the public come to associate "Germany" with superior quality, that some Indian presses incorporated the words "Printed in Germany" into their images even when they were produced in India. (private communication, Indian Allegory **)**

landscapes. "What seemed as alien Western influences in Indian pictures were indigenised and made to serve different ends within popular iconography," says Guha-Thakurta (101). Ironically, then, the use by Indian artists of perspective and the conventions of realism – two elements which, in their "rationality," were expected by Europeans to hasten the demise of Hinduism - were two of the factors which helped to mobilize the imagination of a modern Hindu religious identity.

The primary architect of this Indian neo-realism was Raja Ravi Varma. One of the first and still, arguably, the most famous early Indian artist to paint in oils in a European academic style on Indian themes, he set up his own lithographic press in Bombay in 1894. Mass-produced reproductions of his paintings on Indian cultural and mythological themes, especially his deity images, established a pan-Indian presence for this genre of art. (Jain 1997,Guha-Thakurta 1992). An article in the journal *Kayashtha Samarcar* (1899-1900) by the critic Ramananda Chatterjee argued that Varma's mythological paintings, through their reproduction in magazines, heralded an artistic revival in India which, by its common appeal, would be the main factor in bringing together the "nation." (cited in Guha-Thakurta 1992: 135)

Chatterjee's article shows the relevance of Anderson's model to the printed image as well as to the printed word. Anderson's concept of nation as a community "imagined" through many people's simultaneous reading of printed words applies equally well to the "imagination" of a religious identity by people simultaneously viewing and worshipping the same deity images. In terms of this model, the mytho-pictures' reproduction *in magazines* extends their influence beyond the effect of their reproduction as single images. Magazines, though not as ephemeral as daily newspapers,

are time-specific productions, whose timeliness supports their readers' experience of simultaneity. Everyone first encounters the latest issue of a new magazine at roughly the same time, and its contents are discussed and disseminated particularly during that brief period of newness. Magazine reproduction of an artist's work assures a periodic infusion of that artist's cultural influence into many people's lives at once, until it reaches a saturation point in which it is easy to imagine that "everyone" is viewing exactly the same image; its publication in the magazine is the mechanism for simultaneity. The acts of viewing and of knowing that others are viewing the same images produce the sense of deep horizontal relationship characteristic of an imagined community.

## Conclusion

We have seen in this chapter how mass-produced religious and mythological pictures "democratized" the visual image and supported the imagining of a pan-Indian Hinduism across class and caste divisions. The availability, portability, affordability and uniformity of these images changed the nature and manner of worship from a model mediated by religious specialists in a temple setting to a model in which anyone could direct his or her own ritual in a setting of his or her choice. The mythological and religious subject matter of bazaar images both reflected and shaped transformations of *dharma* in a colonially dominated, but changing, society. By selectively incorporating Western artistic technique into Indian religious iconography, bazaar images mirror the construction of a modern Hindu identity which retains existing culturally resonant symbols while enforming those symbols in a medium that transcends the binary of "fine" European and "low"or "folk" Indian art.

In the next section I will further explore the coextensivity of nineteenth century Hindu religious development with the growth of a national consciousness and the dynamics of simultaneity and intertextuality in fostering this growth.  I will test Walter Benjamin's aesthetic theories about mechanically reproduced art against the evidence of "god pictures."  I will examine Hindu concepts of aesthetics and the rules for the production and worship of sacred images and the relationship between these rules and "photo bhakti."

Chapter III

# PICTURING THE DIVINE: AESTHETIC UNDERSTANDINGS, EAST AND WEST

## Introduction

In order to understand the power of mechanically reproduced images of the goddess, we must understand several things. First, there is the insider position expressed by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy:

> Indian art is essentially religious. The conscious aim of Indian art is the intimation of Divinity… [J]ust as through all Indian schools of thought there runs like a golden thread the fundamental idealism of the Upanishads, the Vedanta, so in all Indian art there is a unity that underlies all its bewildering variety. (Coomaraswamy 1981)

Then it is necessary to understand the difference between European and Indian categories of aesthetics and the cultural significance of multiplicity in Eastern and Western art. It is also important to understand Walter Benjamin's distinction between the "cult value" and the "exhibition value" of works of art. Finally, it is important to interrogate that distinction as applied to "god pictures" in a cultural context where multiplicity was regarded as a divine attribute. Western categories of art and aesthetics are very different from Hindu categories; to view "god pictures" through an exclusively Western aesthetic lens is to misunderstand much of their import. At the same time, I will argue that "god pictures", or Hindoo mythopictures, represent a third term in aesthetics which is analogous to modern Hinduism itself. This artistic genre, like modern Hindu religious identity, may usefully be viewed as a "creole" genre, syncretically incorporating

elements of the aesthetics and artistic conventions of two very different cultures to form a new and unique thing.

Richard Davis points out, in *Lives of Indian Images*, that

> An Indian religious image…does not appear to us in a museum the same as it does to Indian worshipers in a temple. The way it is displayed, the frame surrounding the objects, and the expectations the two audiences bring to their encounters with the object differ dramatically. (Davis, *Lives*, 17ff)

In a museum exhibition, says Davis, the image is a visual object to be savored aesthetically. In a devotional setting, the image is an interactive object of worship; it is seen, touched, anointed, garlanded with flowers, sung to, and loved. In a temple or home altar, an image is more agent than object:

> In popular terminology, Hindus say that the deity… "gives *darsan" (darsan dena* is the Hindi expression), and the people "take *darsan" (darsan lena)…* "Seeing" in this religious sense is not an act which is initiated by the worshiper. Rather, the deity presents itself to be seen in its image…[a]nd the people "receive" [its] *darsan*. (Eck: 6)[71]

Aesthetic concerns in Hindu iconography are secondary to the worshiper's experience of divine presence. As we shall see, even mechanically reproduced images of the divine are primarily regarded within their faith communities as vehicles of *shakti*, divine power.

## Terminology

Various terms have been used to talk about mechanically reproduced Hindu religious images. Kajri Jain favors the generic "bazaar art," with its connotations of commodification and of something cheap, common, and very widely available, and its

subcategories "calendar art" and "efficacious images" (referring, respectively, to the images' function and to their impact on the viewer.)  Tapati Guha-Thakurta (2007) coined the term "mytho-pictures" to refer to nineteenth century lithographs which married European techniques of realism with Indian mythological and religious subject matter. Christopher Pinney refers to mass-produced images as "photos of the gods,"[72] a common Indian sobriquet, while H. Daniel Smith uses the equally common variation "god posters." Stephen R. Inglis favors "framing pictures," another Indianism.  Other terms for these prints and their genre include "god photos," "god pictures," "mytho-realism" (Pinney), and "Indian kitsch."  Diana Eck,  whose *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* deals with the theory and method of "visual hermeneutics" in the study of Hinduism, uses the term "image" to refer both to sculpture and painting; her usage reflects the broad connotations of Sanskrit *murti*, meaning "form" or "embodiment, the general term for an image which is an object of worship, as distinct from *pratima* or *pratikriti*, which connote "likeness." (Eck: 38)  In this project, I use "bazaar art" as a general term for the genre of Indian mechanically reproduced images, and "image", "god picture," and "deity picture" as general terms, understanding "image" to mean *murti*;[73]  I use "mythopictures" to refer to the work of the Calcutta Art Studio and early artists such as Ravi Varma.  "Image" is, of course, a generic term in English, but in this context, I, like Eck, understand it to refer to images of the gods.  This nuance is important, because it is central to my project that the images under discussion be understood as sacred, or

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[71][In Hindu culture] "Seeing" was (and continues to be) understood as a tangible encounter in which sight reaches out to "touch" objects and "take" them back into the seer (Lutgendorf, in Mittal & Thursby 2008:45)

[72] "Photo" in Indian English can mean any picture, not necessarily a photograph.

[73] *Murti* was translated as "idol" in the pejorative sense by Europeans; some Hindus today have reclaimed the English "idol" .  I prefer *murti* as a neutral term.

"religious" images – pictures not just to be displayed but to be worshiped, as Ramakrishna admonished Nanda.

It is also important to understand the concept of the goddess as *Shakti*, cosmic energy which transcends the academic questions such as: Is there one goddess or many goddesses? Are X and Y the "same" goddess? Kathleen M. Erndl writes,

> One on level, it is possible to speak of the Hindu Goddess as a single omnipotent being, Mahadevi or the Great Goddess. On another level, it is possible to speak of various manifestations of the Great Goddess such as the three cosmic goddess Mahalaksmi, Mahasarasvati, and Mahakali who are manifestations of the one Mahadevi. On still another level, it is possible to speak of numerous individual goddesses as distinct entities with their own distinctive personalities, iconographies, stories, and cult practices…*Sakti* is such a fluid concept that it seems to transcend distinctions of singular and plural. (Pintchman 2002: 199)

My project does not attempt to answer the one-or-many question authoritatively; it simply asks what popular mechanically reproduced images of the goddess have to say to us about Hindu religious identity formation. It presupposes the insider position which homologizes "lesser tradition" goddesses to "greater tradition" goddesses as well as modern goddesses to classical goddesses. To draw unnecessary distinctions amongst different manifestations of the goddess, or to insist that they are "different" goddesses, is to miss the point that Hindu identity, too, was a fluid concept in the late colonial period. This fluidity was occasioned, in large part, by foreign interventions in India's religions, culture, and economy, but the among the indigenous symbols which served most effectively to organize and stabilize a sense of religious and national identity were those which drew on a broad and deep common vocabulary of goddess imagery. I argue that, while many localized images of the divine feminine remained local, there emerged from nineteenth century Bengal, the historical stronghold of Devi worship, an overarching

symbol of Mahadevi as the mother of *all*. This symbol, particularly in its mechanically reproduced forms, provided the basis for devotees to develop a "broad, horizontal sense" of religious identity grounded in an awareness of simultaneity of devotion even while it allowed for individual differences.

Modern Hinduism was, in many respects, coextensive with the development of Hindu nationalism, a fact which has led scholars outside the field of religious studies to consider goddess images as politically charged. However, I intend to set aside the political discussion, and investigate goddess images as religious images, on the principle that religious things may be, and should be, taken as meaningful on their own plane of reference. David Kinsley, writing from the perspective of religious studies, asks: "How does one study religious things as religious things?" His solution is for the scholar to adopt the stance of an objective but friendly insider. He writes,

> One must acquaint oneself with their [religious things'] context, one must be sensitive to the cultural setting of a given phenomenon…[This approach] demands an openness to a dimension of reality that may not be experienced by the interpreter in his own life. (Kinsley 1977: 5)

In this chapter, I follow Kinsley's lead. I endeavor to take the religious dimension of mechanically reproduced images as meaningful on its own terms. I provide an overview of Indian aesthetic theory, consider Walter Benjamin's theories of mechanically reproduced art in relation to "god posters," and delve more deeply into the iconography, the typology, and the theological implications of lithographic images. I will focus on iconic representations of, and Hindu understandings, of Mahadevi, the great goddess.

In her study entitled *Images of Indian Goddesses: Myths, Meanings and Models*, historian of religion Madhu Bazaz Wangu proposes that

> In order to experience the symbolic imagery of the goddesses fully, a viewer must become *an intellectually competent and emotionally sensitive onlooker*…Hindu devotional images or artworks have three main layers: mythic subject-matter, iconographic form, and symbolic and metaphysical meanings. Understanding and experiencing the three layers together results in aesthetic delight *(Rasa-svada)*. (Wangu 2003: 13-14)

Wangu's point about becoming a competent and sensitive onlooker is particularly salient with regard to images of the goddess, because certain aspects of the goddess have long been understood in Hindu culture as offering role models for women. We shall return to the question of how such models have affected, and continue to affect, women's social and religious roles and self-understanding in modern Hindu culture. However, in exploring the goddess' iconography, we should recall that many of the discomforts of Hinduism under colonial rule were expressed in terms of women's bodies. As we saw in our sampling of newspaper articles, issues such as women acting as religious specialists and the medical treatment of women by "strange" male doctors were topics of enormous public concern. In the course of the century, *sati* was banned (1828), widow-remarriage legalized (1856) and intercourse with wives younger than twelve was prohibited. (Chaudhuri 1990, vol. 2: 34) Thus, Mahadevi's emergence as an icon of modern Hindu religious identity had implications which transcended sectarian or doctrinal boundaries to embrace the changing status of women in late-colonial Indian culture.

Feminine iconic images were by no means an innovation in the nineteenth century; what was new was their proliferation through mechanical reproduction, which brought them from the public and regulated space of the temple into the home. In her seminal study *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, Eck writes:

> The iconic image has had a central role in Hindu worship for about two thousand years…The development of images used in worship occurred at the same time as the development of the temples which house the images. (Eck 1998:38-39)

Although clay images from the archaeological sites of Mohenjo-daro and Harappa (ca 2600 BC) have been justifiably identified as prototypes of Shiva and goddess figures, there is no definitive evidence for or against their use as cult or ritual objects. (See Banerjea 1974, 158 ff) The objects of Hindu worship may be iconic or aniconic, *svarupa* or *svayambhu* (natural or self-created) or made by human hands, permanent or ephemeral.[74] Aniconic images may include pots of water, stones,[75] fire, particular plants (for example, the tulsi, which is not only associated with, but is considered a form of, Vishnu), or, most famously, the *linga* or "sign" associated with Shiva. The epics contain several stories in which *lingas* are created on the spot for the purpose of worship, then returned to the elements through immersion in a river or the ocean.

Aniconic traditions notwithstanding, Richard Davis characterizes Hindu India from 700 – 1200 CE as "among the most image-saturated of all religious cultures." (Assman 2001:107) This embracing of the iconic was, not surprisingly, coextensive with the rise of temple culture and ritual. Due (in Davis' view) to the support of a wealthy elite and of religious specialists, and to a public perception of this mode of ritual practice as efficacious, this culture became "the most visible form of medieval Hindu religiosity." (*Ibid.*, p. 109) With the rise of temple culture, Vishnu, Shiva, and, to a somewhat lesser

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[74] Examples of ephemeral sacred images are *rangoli*, designs drawn in rice flour at domestic thresholds; or the unfired clay images made for festivals, which are "dismissed" at the festival's end by immersion.

[75] The *salagrama* stone, which has attained a place in pan-Indian ritual, is a *svarupa*, a naturally-occurring form of Vishnu found primarily in the Gandaki River, Nepal. Inherently sacred, it needs no consecration rites when it is installed for worship. For a Hindu, it *is* Vishnu. Similarly, the river Narmada produces *bana linga* stones, considered *svayambhu* or "self-born" lingas, which may be worshiped as Shiva without consecration. (Eck, 34-35)

extent the Goddess or Shakti,[76] became preeminent deities through much of India, while theologies developed regarding divine modes of being: manifest, unmanifest, formless and embodied, with or without attributes (*saguna/nirguna*), related to the accessibility of the divine, and privileging the intersection of divine attributes and accessibility in the worship of *murtis*. (*Ibid.,* p. 113) Rock-cut images of Durga conquering the buffalo demon began to appear by the sixth century CE, establishing an iconography which persisted for some fourteen hundred years. It is important to understand that such images, in their temple settings, were regarded by their worshippers as theophanies, manifestations of the divine on the physical plane, not "art" in the sense of "a self-contained aesthetic object" (Davis 1997).

## Mulitiplicity in Hindu Art

Can one define Hindu art? Heather Elgood asks in her contribution to the 2008 edited work *Studying Hinduism: Key Concepts and Methods*. As she notes, there is considerable overlap between Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain imagery and iconography from the second century BCE to the third century CE (Mittal & Thursby 2008 :4), making it difficult to say what is, in exclusive religious terms, *Hindu* rather than Indian art. Art historian Doris Srinivasan argues that multiplicity of heads and limbs, a concept which she finds rooted in the Vedas, "is one of the most characteristic features attributed to the divine in Indian art" (Srinivasan, 1978). She presents a model in which

> Multiple body parts and forms are associated with a deity who creates the phenomenal world[;]… who represents the raw material out of which the

[76] "Folk" goddesses are traditionally linked to particular sites from which their powers extend outward; see Dehejia 1999, 59 ff., and Pintchman 2001. However, Shakti worship is, in Pintchman's view, "without question the most widespread form of religiosity expressed in the Hindu tradition." (Pintchman 2001: 117).

> phenomenal world is created[;… and] with a deity who creates, projects, or emanates forms from its numen into the phenomenal world. It is by these forms that the deity is apprehended in externality. (Srinivasan 1997: 24-26)

Elgood extends that argument to say that "multiple heads and arms on some Hindu sculpture distinguish it from Jain and Buddhist imagery" (Mittal 2008:4), but the operative word here is "some": there are examples of multilimbed Jain temple statues later than the third century CE. Removed from their temple settings, such statues may be distinguishable from similar Hindu statues only by their provenance. "Hindu" art is not, then, an absolutely distinct religious subcategory of Indian art in general[77]. However, multiplicity is an important, even a defining, cultural and religious motif in the mechanically reproduced Hindu art of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and a consideration of its theological significance will further our understanding of bazaar images as linking devices in modern Hindu identity.

Multiplicity is a characteristic feature of virtually all Hindu iconography depicting the goddess in her powerful, or *shakti*, aspect. Her four, six, eight, or ten arms depict her power to be and do many things simultaneously for her many "children," not unlike the cosmic cow whose multiple udders provide milk for members of all communities. Her power includes the capacity to change shape according to the needs of the situation. As we shall see, the figures of a multi-armed Durga slaying the buffalo demon and of her multi-armed alter ego, Kali, contributed enormously to the development of a pan-Indian religious sense through the print media of books, plays, and pictures. In the context of nineteenth-century Indian religious identity formation, we may well claim the

[77] "Hindu", as we saw in chapter 1, need not be an exclusionary religious term.

mechanically reproduced image of a multi-armed goddess, who nourishes and protects, as a quintessentially "Hindu" image.

## *Rasa*: A Hindu Way of Seeing

Indian theories of aesthetics and western theories of aesthetics operate from different conceptual categories. According to art historian Partha Mitter, "Traditionally Indian aesthetics attaches a great deal of importance to the role of a wide range of emotions and their treatment in literature and art" (Mitter 1977: 144). By contrast, in reason-ruled Western aesthetics, "The Platonic notion of the Ideal has played a very crucial part in Western aesthetics and especially in the visual arts" (*Ibid*., p. 272).

Nineteenth-century Western art criticism privileged realism, rational composition, and "rarified notions of the 'beautiful' and the 'emotive'" (Guha-Thakurta 2007:135), while indigenous Indian artists were concerned with *rasa*, a sophisticated theory of emotional responses to various sorts of artistic stimuli.[78] Furthermore, the Western propensity to distinguish the functional from the beautiful produced, in Indian art schools under colonial leadership, the fixed belief that while Indian students could be good craftsmen and copyists, they were incapable of producing original artwork of real aesthetic value. (Mitter 1994) These categorical differences may explain, at least in part, why Western scholars of religion have paid relatively little attention to vernacular Hindu religious art until recently. The colonial sensibility in India which valued Western

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[78] The nine rasas are: shringara (love), hasya (joy), adbhuta (wonder), shanta (calmness), raudra (anger), veerya (courage), karuna (sadness), bhayanaka (fear) and vibhatsa (disgust). From each rasa various emotions may emerge, but the rasa is the same basic energy even though there may be a different chemical makeup and mental aspect to the specific emotion. A good example is shringara rasa, in which you may have love for your partner or love of a friend or love of art. These are all different kinds of love…, but still the same essential emotion and supported by the same underlying energy, or rasa of love. (Peter Marchand, interview, *Integral Yoga Magazine*, Winter 2008)

painting as "high" or "real" art, devalued indigenous forms of graphic representation as "bazaar art," which was to say, not really art at all, but something which appealed to the overly emotional and insufficiently rational "native" masses. These two concepts met in the enormously popular lithographic color prints which combined elements of Western design and technique with indigenous devotional subject matter.

The creation of an image is a religious practice, from the selection of the raw materials to the moment when the artist's vision of the divine form is fully realized. [79] The *Shilpa Shastras*, Sanskrit texts based on orally transmitted traditions governing iconography and iconometry, deal with the production of images. (Eck 1998:51) They delineate what kinds of wood should be used, how and when the trees should be felled, and how to propitiate the spirits living in the trees to quit their habitat so that it may be used to house a divinitiy. They prescribe rituals for the selection and preparation of stone. In Diana Eck's words,

> In the Hindu plenum, every part of the order of "nature" may be the abode of a *genius loci*, so the first stage in claiming the raw material of an image is to invite those residents to depart. (Eck 1998:52)

According to these traditions, the *silpin* (artist) should be in a state of ritual purity before beginning work on a statue. He should perform appropriate rituals and prayers consecrating his tools, stone or wood, and paint, and he should be "[g]uided by inner vision and revelation, conceptualizing the appearance of the work during this mental state of openness and receptivity." (Mittal & Thursby 2008: 5)

[79] The common word for a sacred image is *murti*, "a form, body, or figure..embodiment, incarnation, manifestation". The terms *pratima* and *pratikriti*, both meaning "likeness", are also used but, like the term "icon," convey less of a sense of dimensionality. (See Eck: 38) I use the term "image" more or less interchangeably with *murti*, but prefer the English term for the sake of clarity.

There are rites of consecration before, during, and after an image's installation in a temple by a religious specialist. The image is "enlivened" in various ways, until at last the eyes are ritually "opened". In a wooden image, this may involve painting the eyes as the final detail of creation; in a stone one, the eyes may have been covered with a coating which is now removed by a priest. (Eck 1998:52-53**)** Now the image is no longer an object made of wood or stone, but a *murti***,** a "living" image through which the devotee can enjoy *darshan*, the experience of seeing and being seen by the divine. Ironically, in a temple setting an image may be difficult to view, either because of the press of crowds, or because it is all but obscured by drapery and garlands. (Mittal 2008**)** The experience of *darshan*, though understood as visual, involves the worshiper's sense of being in the presence of the deity as much as it does having a clear view of the deity's image. In a sense, then, it does not matter what the deity looks like: what is important is the transformative emotional experience associated with *darshan.*

The study of emotion, or *bhava*, is most highly developed within *bhakti* (devotional) Hinduism. This form of Hinduism

> [e]mphasizes the love of a god or goddess, and describes stages, types, roles, and triggers of emotion. This is the form of religion that is most intense in modern India, and probably most widespread. The major deities of the *bhakti* tradition are Shiva, Vishnu, and Shakti, and they are worshiped through the ritual of *puja*, which usually involves offerings of flowers, fruit, and incense. (Corrigan 2008:53)

The Sanskrit literary tradition *Alankarashastra* focuses on aesthetic emotion, *rasa*, experienced by one who identifies with a dramatic character or situation. Such emotion is said to be joyful, powerful and extraordinary, yet impersonal and generic. It is the "juice" or essence of a work of music, drama, or visual art. It brings a sense of

wonder, and it affects the consciousness, much as the image and story of Sravana affected the young Gandhi. The experience of *rasa* transforms the more basic, and more personal, emotion of *bhava*[80] into an exalted mood akin to religious bliss (*brahma-svada),*[81] in which the person can empathize with the emotion and situation while maintaining the perspective of a witness. Madhu Bazaz Wangu suggests that "this aesthetic pleasure…arises only when the onlooker experiences the symbolic imagery in his innermost self." (Wangu 2003: 16) That is to say, aesthetic experience in Hindu terms is both participatory and transformative, and, on the deepest level, it may be coextensive with religious experience.

The image is the vehicle through which *rasa* is conveyed and its corresponding emotion is evoked; its efficacy as a vehicle decides what is *rasavat* ("inspired, imbued with *rasa"*) or *ni-rasa* (without rasa). However, the image's efficacy depends to some extent on what the viewer brings to it as a witness; there is an interactive relationship between seer and seen, as there was when Gandhi decided to take Sravan as an example for future conduct. Only a viewer who can internalize and assimilate the aesthetic experience – that is, an "insider" for whom the image resonates culturally, symbolically, and personally – can find religious bliss in the experience of *rasa*. From the standpoint of Hindu aesthetics, viewing a sacred image involves active participation on the viewer's part.

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[80] The eight basic *bhavas* are: love; humor; grief; anger; energy; fear; disgust; astonishment. Their corresponding *rasas* are: erotic; comic; tragic; furious; heroic; fearful; terrible; marvelous. (Corrigan: 56-57)

[81] See Wangu 2003: 16

Wangu observes that while twentieth-century art historians such as Heinrich Zimmer, Alice Boner, Stella Kramrisch and Kapila Vatsyayan have analyzed sacred images in terms of their formal elements and principles of composition,

> The goddess images set within myths and legends…make up the uppermost sheathing of a sacred work of art. Behind this narrative surface is the second layer, the form or formal structure of an image…The third sheath is revealed when the onlooker recognizes the mythic image, feels its form and understands its symbolic meaning. [This] is the level where the symbolic meaning with its metaphysical nuances is disclosed. (Wangu 2003: 14)

This is an important observation, in terms of "insider/outsider" debate, because it intervenes on the tendency to privilege one position as exclusively correct. The "outsider" position of an art historian is by no means irrelevant to analysis of goddess pictures, but for an insider/devotee, Wangu reminds us, there are deeper and more transformative levels.

According to religious scholar June McDaniel, in *rasa* theory depersonalized emotion is desirable

> [b]ecause the aesthete can experience a wide range of emotions yet be protected from their painful aspects. Emotion is appreciated as if through a glass barrier…Though the glass is clear, which allows a union of sorts with the observed object, the window is always present, which maintains the dualism. This becomes important for the religious dimensions of *rasa*, where the duality between the worshiper and the god (an important concept in *bhakti* devotion) must always be maintained. (in Corrigan 2008: 57)

Thus, a viewer can enjoy and worship terrifying images such as Kali or Durga equally with serene images such as Lakshmi or Sarasvati, without being completely overcome either by fear or by love. In *bhakti- puja*, the devotee seeks fully to embody the role of *bhakta*, lover. S/he may love the beloved as friend, child, Mother, or

consort,[82] but the goal of *bhakti* is consciously to experience loving and being loved, not to merge with the Beloved. In Ramakrishna's famous phrase, "I want to taste sugar, not become sugar."

McDaniel cites sage Narada's tenth-century CE *Bhakti Sutras*, devoted to the god Krsna, for their description of the degrees of *bhakti:*

> One begins by glorifying and appreciating the god's greatness, then loving his beauty, worshipping him and remembering him constantly, identifying with being the god's slave, then his friend, then his parent, then loving him as a wife loves her husband. The devotee should entirely surrender to Krsna and feel absorbed in him and yet still feel sorrow at the pain of separation from him. This feeling of union yet separation is considered to be the highest religious state by Narada in his *sutra* 82 (Tyagisananda 1978: 23, cited by McDaniel in Mittal & Thursby 2008: 161).

The goal of Hindu aesthetics in a *bhakti* context, then, is for the worshiper to experience a powerful and transformative emotion, inspired by the *murti* (image), even while the *murti* protects the viewer from being overwhelmed by emotion.[83] The important thing in the Hindu aesthetic experience of worship is the transformative effect of devotion, which occurs through the mutual "seeing" of *darshan*. The question is not one of the image's beauty, originality, or provenance, but rather the image's efficacy as a "window to god" and vehicle of transformation.

In the late nineteenth-century debate on image worship, representative positions were held by Swami Dayananda and Swami Vivekananda, Ramakrishna's chief disciple. Dayananda objected to image worship both as non-Vedic, and as placing a limit on infinite God. He maintained that an omniscient, omnipresent God could not be contained

[82] In Shakti *bhakti,* the devotee does not imagine him/herself as the goddess' consort; in Vaishnava *bhakti* both men and women may imagine themselves as Krishna's beloveds.

[83] In her article "The Efficacious Image", Kajri Jain cites an 8th-century treatise on painting: "The *Chitrasutra* describes how the depiction of celestial figures, and in particular of the celestial gaze, has consequences for the welfare of the people: "A pair of eyes, equal in proportion, wide, lotus red at the tips,

in any form; a *murti* was inert matter and no more. Vivekananda maintained that so long as the finite image was understood to be simply a vehicle for worshipping infinite Brahman,

> the worship is positively beneficial; nay, it is absolutely necessary…[I]f it stands for the one God, the worship thereof will bring both Bhakti and Mukti (i.e., devotion and liberation). (Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, Vol 3, Bhakti Yoga, ch VIII: Worship of Substitutes and Images, online edition)

In the inclusive spirit of *sanatana dharma*, God may be conceived of equally well as *saguna* (with attributes) or as *nirguna* (without form or attributes). But, in the words of the *Vishnu Samhita*, "Without a form, how can God be meditated on?" (cited in Eck 1998: 45)

### Cult Value, Exhibition Value, and the Power of Multiplicity

In his famous essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," **(**1928**)** Walter Benjamin identifies the uniqueness of an original work of art, its "aura," as inseparable from its use value as a ritual object and its "being imbedded in the fabric of tradition." (Benjamin 1992:223) He takes it as self-evident that

> The earliest art works originated in the service of a ritual – first the magical, then the religious kind…the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function. (*Ibid.*, pp. 223-224)

Mechanical reproduction, Benjamin argues, "emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual", but in the process, the aura is lost; the reproduced work of art is detached from its "presence in time and space, its unique existence"; it is no longer unique, no longer authentic, no longer "real." With the emancipation of art from ritual, it loses its "cult value" associated with magic or religion, leaving it only with

attractive, pleasing to behold, with dark pupils, vouchsafes prosperity and happiness." (Chitrasutra 38, in

the “exhibition value” associated with a commodity. In effect, a work of art loses its religious numinosity when it becomes a work of art, although some trace of authenticity as “ritual power” adheres to the artist, or to the collector who owns the work of art .

In their work on mechanically reproduced Indian art, Kajri Jain and Stephen R. Ingliss draw attention to the high esteem in which certain “calendar artists”, including Raja Ravi Varma, are held, not only for their talent but for their influence on other artists and on people’s devotional lives (Jain 2007; Ingliss, in Babb and Wadley 1995). This renown is, however, a modern phenomenon; the identity of the person who created a *murti* is, historically, far less significant in the world of Hindu art than the identity of the deity depicted. The majority of statues, trade labels and other such images of the divine are unsigned, undated, and anonymous: the creator only provides the vehicle through which the deity becomes manifest. While many early nineteenth-century lithographs do bear a publisher’s name, rarely is the artist identified. The image’s “reality” is not conferred upon it by any set of contingent circumstances of time, place, authorship, or exhibition value; Indian religious images are, themselves, portals into a dimension of reality which surpasses “ritual value” or “exhibition value.” Richard Davis explains:

> For many centuries, most Hindus have taken it for granted that the religious images they place in temples and home shrines for purposes of worship are alive. They believe these physical objects, visually or symbolically representing particular deities, come to be infused with the presence of life or power of those deities. Hindu priests are able to bring images to life through a complex ritual “establishment” that invokes the god or goddess into its material support. Priests and devotees then maintain the enlivened image as a divine person through ongoing liturgical activity; they must awaken it in the morning, bathe it, dress it, feed it, entertain it, praise it, and eventually put it to bed at night. They may also petition it, as a divine being, to grant them worldly benefits and liberation from all suffering. (Davis 1997: 6-7)

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Davis 2007: 149)

An Indian religious image appears very differently to worshipers in a temple than it does to visitors to a museum. In the temple, it retains "aura," its "cult value," and its ritual power. Removed from its sacred context, "sent here and there" (Benjamin 1992: 225) like a parcel, and exhibited to the masses, the sacred image in Benjamin's model becomes a "work of art" and, particularly in mechanically reproduced media such as photography, its exhibition value becomes superior to its ritual value (*Ibid*., p. 226) "Instead of being based on ritual," Benjamin notes that the function of art "begins to be based on another practice - politics" (*Ibid*., p. 224). Art now serves the purpose of bringing together the masses, recalling Benedict Anderson's vision of a population imaginatively united through the print media. However, in being emancipated "from its parasitical dependence on ritual" (*Ibid.*), the work of art "designed for reproducibility" takes on a secular function. If the "cult value" of a work of art was the transformation of religious consciousness, as in Indian aesthetics, the political value of mechanically reproduced art, for Benjamin, lies in its relation to political struggle.

Contrary to Benjamin's model, which equates mechanical reproduction with the loss of "aura" and the desacralization of society, I argue that mechanically reproduced late-colonial religious lithographs actually gained in religious efficacy. Their power stemmed, at least in part, from the Hindu cultural/theological understanding of multiplicity as a manifestation of *shakti (*power, efficacy, agency).[84] Wendy Doniger, like Doris Srinivasan, understands multiplicity and *shakti* as related concepts:

> [A]t least one of the purposes of the many heads and arms depicted in Hindu iconographic figures is to signify the multiplicity of powers and possibilities of

[84] In the *Devi-Mahatmya*, Devi is called *shakti*, "power." As such, she is both immanent and transcendent; she makes possible the creation, preservation and destruction of the universe and she is the *shakti* of all things. (Pintchman 1994: 120-121)

> divine action. Multiplicity equally characterizes the possibilities of human action in the Hindu view of society… (Doniger O'Flaherty 1976:376)

From the standpoint of Hindu iconography, then, the depiction of multilimbed deities evokes a cultural resonance with concepts of power and agency. Through this lens, the multiple reproduction of such images, rather than reducing their "aura" or numinosity, may be understood as *increasing* their power and efficacy. A related mythological theme involves the multiplication of the deity him- or herself. One of the best-known examples of this multilocation appears in the Vaishnava *bhakti* tradition, in the story of Krishna's taking multiple forms so that each of the *gopis* (cowgirls) of Vrindavan, who all adored him, experienced that she had his full love and attention at a personal level.

## Adya Ma Shakti and "Photo Bhakti"

In this vein, June McDaniel reports from her fieldwork in West Bengal on the interesting case of Calcutta's Adya Shakti Kali, who appeared in 1915 and demanded to be worshiped through her photo rather than her statue:

> Many small shops on Calcutta streets have a common picture handing from the top of the stall or sitting in a wall niche. It is the photograph of a black, tribal-looking goddess, with a crown and four arms, standing upon a prone Shiva. Storekeepers said that the picture was of Adya Shakti, and that it had much power. The photograph itself was widely venerated. Indeed the goddess herself had decreed that her photograph rather than her statue was to be worshipped. (McDaniel 2004: 198)

This image of Kali was made popular by Annada Thakur, an Ayurvedic practitioner and ecstatic, whose own photograph is also widely displayed and revered as a "guru photo." The story of its discovery, recorded in his autobiography, suggests that the

image should be regarded as *svayambhu*, one that appears spontaneously or "chooses its own place on earth." (Pintchman, 2002: 160) Usually, the worship of such images remains identified with the place of their appearance or discovery; Adya Ma, however, established a far broader locus.

According to McDaniel, Annada Thakur was a Kali devotee who had frequent dreams and visions of the goddess, like his more famous fellow resident of Calcutta, Sri Ramakrishna, of the previous generation. In a dream, the goddess commanded Thankur to rescue her statue where it lay hidden in muddy water at the Eden Gardens (India's foremost cricket stadium, established 1864).

> He found the statue between the two trees she had specified… It was a statue of the goddess Kali in her tantric form as Adya Shakti Kali, or Kali of primordial power, naked and with matted hair and a sword…

He brought the statue home and began to worship it in his personal *puja*. However,

> While the Adya Shakti Kali was initially satisfied with household worship of her statue, after a few days she decided that she was dissatisfied with worship at only one place—she wanted much broader worship, and she also wanted devotional rather than ritual worship. So she ordered Thakur to immerse her in the Ganges and have people worship her photograph instead. *This was new technology at the time, and an early case of what came to be known as "photo-bhakti"—taking the darsan of a goddess from a photograph. But she could indeed get wider worship, for pictures could be spread throughout villages and marketplaces and home altars, as well as just temples.* (McDaniel 2006: 81-82) (italics mine)

Thakur's account, in his autobiography, of her message resonates with the cultural symbol of Krishna and the *gopis*:

> [She told Thakur]: "I do not like to be worshiped at one place only. So I won't remain installed at a particular place [as a statue]. I shall be with all my devotees…I do not want to be worshiped with Shastric rites alone. If anyone pays homage and gives offerings to me in the simple and sincere language of the heart, such as 'O My Mother, take this food, wear this garment' and then uses those things himself, it will be regarded as an act of worship. The prayer of a simple and sincere heart constitutes my worship…I will reveal myself in any image you may invoke me in with devotion" (Thakur, *Autobiographical Scenes,* p. 57; cited in McDaniel 2004: 200-201)

According to instructions, Thakur took the statue to the middle of the Ganges in a boat and threw it overboard. Afterwards he fainted and was in bed for three days. During this time, the goddess visited him in another dream. She said that her name was Adya Shakti ("primordial power") and that she should be worshiped as Adya Ma ("primordial/ancient mother"). She narrated a hymn to herself, which Thakur was told to write down and share. When Thakur told his friends about this dream, they said that many people who had taken photographs of the statue had had dreams telling them to immerse the photographs in the Ganges. That these secondary images were to be regarded as *murtis*, images no less sacred than the stone statue, can be deduced from this dream-instruction. (McDaniel 2004:201) Nevertheless, not all photographs were immersed; in the end, the original vehicle for the goddess' manifestation, the statue, was ritually dismissed while photographs - which one might be inclined to conceive of as secondary - were retained and worshiped. Thakur knew one family whose son fell ill as a result of the family's neglecting to worship Adya Ma. The goddess revealed in a dream that the cause of the illness was the family's neglect of her photograph, which was lying under a pile of clothes and had been nibbled by white ants. When the photo was framed and worshiped, the son recovered. This incident recalls Ramakrishna's warning to Nanda, "Such [goddess] pictures should be worshiped." (*Ibid.*, p. 202)

Benjamin's categories for thinking about mechanically reproduced images hold with respect to Adya Shakti Ma's case only up to a point. Benjamin argues that reproduction leads to a "liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage" (Benjamin 1969:215) by freeing the experience of art from restrictions of place and ritual

and bringing it under the gaze and control of a mass audience.  In his view mechanical reproduction "emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual"; however, once detached from its ritual context, the function of art, instead of being based on ritual, begins to be based on politics. (ibid: 218)  In Benjamin's model, cult value differs markedly from exhibition value. Cult value is essentially maintained through ritual and remains place-bound, whereas exhibition value is a function of accessibility and is increased by mobility and displacement.  Through mobility and displacement, the value of a work of art no longer depends on its creation or "artistic value," but becomes an effect of its consumption or marketability. (*Ibid.*, p. 229)

In McDaniel's example, the goddess *wants* to be emancipated from dependence on ritual worship in one place, by religious professionals, and she insists on being represented through mechanical reproduction in order to accomplish this.  She wants devotion, not formal worship, and she wants to be with all her devotees, not confined to one site in a temple.  She implies clearly that she will be as present, and as powerful, in the mechanical representations of her image as she is in the stone "original," which she instructs Thakur to immerse in the Ganges, and she proves that claim by punishing the family who had a copy of her photograph but ignored it.  The "aura" in this case is not lost through mechanical reproduction, but expanded; in expanding, the image's function is not detached from all ritual, but the understanding of "ritual" is broadened to embrace spontaneous, informal displays of affection.  Here, Benjamin's dialectics between "sacred" ritual and politics and between cult value and exhibition value collapse: the proliferation of Adya Shakti's image through mechanical reproduction enhances both her ritual power and her political efficacy.

Adya Ma's instructions for her worship depart markedly from formal temple worship, in which interactions with the deity are mediated by religious specialists. When offering flowers, food, or clothing to a *murti* in a ritual context, the devotee normally does not use the offerings for himself; people waiting to present garlands at a shrine are even expected to make the effort not to breathe in their fragrance, thereby appropriating the sacrifice to themselves. A devotee may bring food, which is offered to the deity and then, possibly, returned to the giver as *prasad*; but the food is offered, and returned by, a priest within a ritual context. Adya Ma's direction to her worshippers to offer her food and clothing and then use the offerings themselves as an "act of worship" violates temple protocol, eliminates the religious specialist, and affirms a radical unity between herself and her worshipers. Such an informal, intimate approach to worship is very characteristic of the *bhakti* approach, as expressed in the *Bhagavad Gita* 9:26 where Krishna says: "If one offers Me with love and devotion a leaf, a flower, fruit or water, I will accept it."

Ironically, the one known surviving photograph of the "original" Adya Ma is not easy to view; it is small and lacks detail. It is a frontal view of the statue, which depicts, as McDaniel says, a "tribal looking" black woman with four arms. Her upper left hand holds a curved knife; in her lower left is a severed head. Her upper right hand makes the classic gesture for *abhaya*, fearlessness, while the lower right indicates boon-bestowing. She wears jewelry: bracelets, anklets, a necklace, and a crown, and she is garlanded, though apparently with flowers and not heads, as Kali typically is. She stands on a recumbent figure, seen from the crown of the head, whom we take to be Shiva because Kali is so commonly depicted standing on Shiva, although, given the figure's perspective,

it is impossible to identify certainly. Her right foot is forward of her left, in a stance associated with Kali, although, again, given the perspective and the picture's size and definition, it is difficult to tell whether the front knee is bent as it characteristically is in such statues. She gazes straight at the camera, her face serene. Her tongue protrudes slightly, typical, again, of Kali's iconography.



**Figure 18 Adya Ma Shakti**

Today there is a temple to Adya Ma at Dakshineshwar, near Calcutta, which maintains a website (www.adyapeath.org). The website displays the original black-and-white photograph along with color images of a statue constructed on the model of this photograph of a statue. This statue is evidently dressed, garlanded, and worshiped *in situ*. Visitors to a subsidiary website (www.kalighatonline.com/adyapith.htm), which identifies itself with Kalighat[85] in Calcutta, may participate in virtual *aarti*[86] online, and for a fee, payable by Paypal or Paisapay, devotees may engage in custom rituals. Thus, Adya Ma is more than ever with her devotees; the cyber-possibilities for *darshan* render Benjamin's thoughts on "cult value" as tied to location irrelevant in this context. Today Adya Ma is both located in her temple at Dakshineshwar and, symbolically, at Kalighat; and, as she so presciently foresaw, she is also simultaneously present with devotees all over the globe through the mechanically reproduced images of the internet.

Kalighat itself is significant in considering the goddess' multiplicity and power. The story of King Daksha's sacrifice, familiar throughout India, tells of Shiva's marriage to the princess Sati – Daksha's daughter – against her parents' wishes. Daksha is the mythological embodiment of mainstream ritual, the "old-time religion" rooted in Brahmanic practice, while Shiva is often depicted as a wild-haired ascetic who lives in marginal places surrounded by followers of passionate devotion but questionable caste. After the wedding, Daksha holds a *yagya*, an important ritual sacrifice, to which Shiva is not invited. Sati attends alone. Mortified by her father's pointed ignoring of her husband

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[85] Kalighat is regarded as one of the 51 s*hakti peethas* (holy places of cosmic power, dedicated to the worship of the goddess), where the various parts of Sati's dismembered body are said to have fallen following her self-immolation at Daksha's illfated sacrifice. Kalighat represents the site where the toes of the right foot fell. The present Kalighat temple is only some 200 years old; the site has been sacred for centuries.

[86] A form of *puja* (worship), in which the devotee lights lamps and sings devotional songs, also called *aarti*.

– who is, after all, God – she flings herself into the sacrificial fire and dies. The distraught Shiva retrieves her burned body, and begins to dance with it clasped in his arms. His dance covers the cosmos, which is to say, the continent of India. As he dances, the world begins to die because of his grief. Lord Vishnu, whose function it is to preserve creation, throws his discus and cuts fifty-one pieces off Sati's body; the pieces fall to earth in various places, creating power-spots, or *pithas* in which the goddess' *shakti* is eternally concentrated, and the universe is not only saved but renewed. These places, which have been pilgrimage sites for centuries, include Kalighat. This myth is a very interesting example of the theme of multiplicity and power: through dismemberment, the *shakti* in Sati's body is multiplied; each piece, like a hologram, contains the power of the whole, and the power is distributed throughout the continent, imbuing the earth itself with divine power at the *pitha* points and making these points like *tirthas* ("fords") - sites of hierophany, where the sacred breaks through, as it were, into the ordinary world. Thus, Kalighat, as one of the points of concentrated goddess-power, is a remarkably felicitous site for the cyber-distribution of Adya Ma's *darshan* by "photo-bhakti."

While Benjamin could hardly have foreseen the phenomenon of global *darshan*, he was not wrong when he identified the political value of mass-produced art. Not only did mechanically reproduced images of the fierce mother goddess become symbols of political value in Bengal, but, with the ascendancy of British political and economic power, her popularity and influence spread too. The earliest recorded Durga Puja was celebrated privately around 1606 by one of Calcutta's royal families; by 1761 community groups had begun holding neighborhood celebrations by subscription. (Bhattacharya

2007) So important was Durga Puja that in 1757, following the East India Company's victory at Palashi (Plassey) which effectively annexed the country, the commanding general Robert Clive took advantage of the occasion to offer public thanks at the Devi's feet. In 1910 the Indian National Congress countered Clive's gesture by sponsoring the first community *puja* publicly identifying the country with the goddess, effectively offering it back to her. (Chaudhuri 1990, vol 2: 332-333**)**

## Powerful Warrior, Nurturing Mother

The formation of a pan-Indian sense of Hindu identity drew heavily on two modes of understanding the goddess: as warrior and as mother, both of which found expression in the Bengali Mahadevi of the late-colonial period. As a warrior, she is *durga* (inaccessible) and *aparajita* (unconquerable); as a mother, she is infinitely approachable and inclusive, like the cosmic cow who gives milk to all. I argue that appreciating her paradoxical ability to hold the tension of such opposites helps us, as scholars, to understand the goddess' compelling efficacy as a unifying symbol for the vastly complex system of "family resemblances" which comprises modern Hinduism.

From the time of the *Devi-mahatmya (*ca. 300 CE), in which her birth, appearance, and central myths are told in detail (Kinsley 1978; Coburn 1996 ), a personification of *shakti*, called Kali, Durga, and other names, was worshiped throughout the subcontinent as the terrible form of the Devi, or great goddess. Julius Lipner writes:

> [Devi] is divine *sakti* or power personified. She has her benign form and her horrific form. Kali is perhaps the best-known example of the latter. In Bengal, traditionally a stronghold of Sakta religion, Kali's most popular image is of a young woman, jet black and naked but for a garland and short skirt of gory severed heads and hands respectively. She has very long, black, dishevelled hair and a vividly red, protruding, blood-smeared tongue. Dark and dynamic, she has

her consort Siva underfoot, recumbent and white in stark contrast.... Kali is usually four-armed, wielding the sword of enlightening wisdom, a severed head, a bowl of plenty perhaps, with one or two hands in the boon-bestowing or reassuring gesture…Sometimes a vertical eye in the middle of the forehead – the third eye of spiritual knowledge – is included. This may be a grisly image, but it speaks volumes to its votaries, and remarkably is psychologically comforting at the same time…(Lipner 1994: 286)

The following lithographic image from the Ravi Varma Press, Karla-Lonavla, shows the well-known *Smashana Kali*, or "graveyard Kali," in a pose closely resembling that of Adya Ma's statue. This image is undated; probably it was produced between 1895, when this branch of the Ravi Varma Press was founded, and 1930, making it roughly contemporary with Adya Ma's appearance to Annada Thakur. At the bottom appears the name Anant Shivaji Desai, Mumbai, possibly the name of the distributor. The Mother's skin is blue, her loose hair is black and flows past her knees. She wears a gold crown, gold earrings, gold necklace, bracelets and anklets; in addition her neck is garlanded with stylized heads. The palms of her hands and soles of her feet are red, whether stained with blood or, auspiciously, colored with henna, is left to the viewer's imagination. Her upper right hand gestures "Fear not," the lower right indicates boon bestowing; the upper left hand holds a curved, blood-stained blade, while the lower left holds a severed head dripping blood. Her waist is encircled by a girdle of severed forearms, organs of action (*Karmendriyas*) in Indian thought. She has three eyes, and her red tongue protrudes but does not loll; her face is serene rather than horrific, lovely rather than fearsome. She stands in her characteristic right-foot-forward lunge with an ash-white, leopard-skin-clad Shiva under her feet; her right foot is over his heart, the left on his thight. Shiva's jewelry consists of rudraksha bracelets and garland; in addition, he has a cobra entwined around his left arm. His right hand holds his *damaru*, the double-

headed drum with which he marks Time. They are surrounded by corpses, body parts, and blood; a dog or jackal stands over one fallen body with bared teeth.




**Figure 19 Smashana Kali, Ravi Varma Press**

The scene is, as Lipner says, psychologically rather cheerful despite the grim setting; Shiva appears relaxed, unlike the contorted corpse behind him, and Kali's

expression is mild, even playful. The position of Kali's foot on Shiva's heart, the waist-belt of hands, and even the severed head in her left hand, are all open to interpretation as gestures of *bhakti*. The hands may be understood to represent devotees' dedication of their own actions to the Mother, the severed head as the devotee's renunciation of individual ego and mind to a higher power, and the almost affectionate placement of Kali's foot, hennaed like a bride's, on Shiva's chest, suggests that he, too, is her devotee. However, the corpse-laden setting invites comparison with the state of the country under colonial domination; and Kali's position on top of Shiva speaks to a reversal of the usual, or "proper" order of things in which the husband dominates[87]. It is an image for troubled times.

While many arms are not unique to the goddess' fierce form, they are indelibly associated with her. This multiplicity heralds infinite power, infinite adaptability, and (paradoxically, it might seem) infinite inclusivity and love. As Srinivasan's model suggests, Kali's multiple arms represent her existential status as the numenon from which phenomena exude as well as her paradoxical ability to be all things to all creatures. This *Shakti* embodied is multilimbed and, typically, three-eyed. Mulitiplicity is her essential nature: her ten arms wield weapons, each imbued with a specific lethal power, and this range of possibility renders her powerful over competing multiplicity.

In Kali's most famous myth, the *Devi-mahatmya*, Durga and her assistants, the Matrikas, who are themselves her emanations, face the demon Raktabija, whose every drop of spilled blood produces another demon exactly like the original. The battlefield

[87] The "woman-superior" image in Indian religious art is widely understood as a reference to conditions in the Kali yuga, when *dharmic* order is all but broken down. – Eruch Jessawala, personal communication

quickly fills with duplicate demons. From her forehead, Durga creates Kali, who, sweeping out her huge red tongue, drinks the blood and devours the demon host:

> Out of the surface of her forehead, fierce with frown, issued suddenly Kali of terrible countenance, armed with a sword and noose. Bearing the strange…skull-topped staff, decorated with a garland of skulls, clad in a tiger's skin, very appalling owing to her emaciated flesh, with gaping mouth, fearful with her tongue lolling out, having deep reddish eyes, filling the regions of the sky with her roars, falling upon impetuously and slaughtering the great asuras in that army, she devoured those hordes of the foes of the devas. **(***Devi Mahatmya*,ch. 8**)**

This story illustrates the Devi's power both to create multiple alter-egos in self-defense and to absorb multiple threats into herself. In another episode, she engages in a shape-shifting duel in order to best the demons Chanda and Munda, demonstrating her ability to be everywhere and to respond to all possible contingencies. Kali, or Durga, can be understood as the ground of all being and mother of *all* creatures, even the socially unacceptable or unassimilated (demonic). Her pujas, famously, attracted people of all castes and included not only Muslims but Europeans. (Chaudhuri 1990**)** As Adya Ma told Annada Thakur, her worship need not be professionally mediated nor formally conducted. A verse from one of the best-loved hymns to the goddess says:

> I know no *mantra*, [sacred invocation] nor do I know *yantra* [sacred signs], nor do I know how to perform prayer. I do not know how to invoke you or how to meditate, I know no hymns. I do not know mudras [ritual hand gestures] nor how to make supplications. But this I know for certain: if I follow you within the folds of your love I will be released from all my troubles. **(**Shankara, *Prayer to Beg Forgiveness from the Goddess)*

This statement of pure, radically inclusive *bhakti* may be one of the best explanations – if explanation is needed – for the mother goddess' preeminence as a symbol of Hindu identity and national unity.

As we saw in the last chapter, the Bengali public's myriad anxieties over colonial domination were frequently expressed in terms of women's roles and bodies; the encroachment of foreign values on indigenous social and religious practices required constant adjustments to Hindu understandings of *dharma* and the correct action in any given, unprecedented situation.[88] As the nucleus of British economic interests, Calcutta's economic expansion and the dominance of European capital were reflected in expressions of racism toward the indigenous population. (Chaudhuri 1990, vol. 2: 14)

> Englishmen slapped, kicked and whipped the 'natives' and addressed them as 'niggers' and 'swine' without any hesitation. Murderous assaults on Indian servants were common. Indian men and woman were frequently thrown out of railway carriages…Appeals for redress were of no consequence as the licence for English arrogance was 'virtually built into the judicial system.' (Chaudhuri 1990, vol. 2: 16)

It should not surprise us, then, that the image and worship of Shakti in her fierce aspect took such a strong hold on the popular imagination as a symbol of divine maternal retaliation for such egregious wrongs to her people. At the same time, Kali emerged in the popular ethos as Bengal personified and humiliated, in need of rescue by her sons and daughters.

The image of Kali as suffering mother emerged most influentially in Bankimchandra Chatterjee's *Anandamath* (1882). Set in 1770, the novel centers on a band of warrior-ascetics pledged to defend the motherland against Muslim-British forces through the worship and service of the goddess in the forms of Durga or Kali (Kinsley 1988: 181) At a crucial scene, images are revealed to the hero of the mother's past glory,

[88] It is beyond the scope of this project to do justice to the perceived "feminization" or emasculation of Bengali men under British rule and the implications of that strand of colonial hegemony for power and gender relations. However, there is ample evidence both of colonialism's demoralizing effects on Hindu culture, and of a deeprooted mythological trope in which intractable problems are solved by the intervention of a feminine figure, usually a goddess.

present misery, and future apotheosis as Bharat Mata, Mother India. The "mother-as-she-is", Kali, is "blackened and shrouded in darkness. She has been robbed of everything; that is why she is naked." (*Anandamath*, 149-151; McDermott 2003:185) In puranic mythology, Kali's iconographic attributes of blackness and nakedness evoke wildness and freedom; Chatterjee uses them here as metaphors for Bengal's having been dishonored and stripped by foreign predators.[89] In puranic stories Kali emanates helpers from her own infinite energy; here, the mother depends on her children to redeem her.

Many Western scholars have noted that the goddess in Hindu traditions is depicted in two primary and seemingly contradictory ways: as a fierce independent warrior figure and as a nurturing maternal figure associated with a consort**.** (Hawley and Wulff 1996; Doniger 1980) This apparent dualism is resolved most notably in Bengal, where Durga is honored both as the fierce, demon-fighting form of Shiva's consort Parvati and the mother of Ganesha, Saraswati, Lakshmi and Kartikeya. Each "child" bears characteristic iconographic conventions.[90] (McDaniel, Skulls: 225; Payne, in Kinsley 129) When we examine the figure of Bharat Mata in the next chapter, we will find these attributes incorporated into her iconography, replacing some of Kali's gorier tokens. I suggest that these iconic symbols, by drawing on a common mythic vocabulary, addressed and soothed cultural anxieties derived from the experience of colonization, and assisted worshipers to frame their feelings of political powerlessness in religious terms.

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[89] The fundamental conviction that the earth itself,or the Indian subcontinent itself, is a goddess, indeed, that she is one's mother, pervades the modern cult of Bharat Mata (Kinsley 1988: 181)

[90] Ganesha = elephant-headed god, remover of obstacles, whose public worship was actively promoted in Maharashtra from 1894 on; Saraswati = goddess of learning and wisdom, shown holding a musical

# Conclusion

In Walter Benjamin's European aesthetic model, the mechanical reproduction of a work of art devalues it, destroying its "aura" of uniqueness and authenticity. For Benjamin, a mechanically reproduced work of art has political value, in the sense of art for the masses, but lacks the transformative "aura" and value associated with uniqueness and with the ritual function appropriate to "real" art. Western considerations of Hindu iconography have tended to overlook the importance of mechanically reproduced images because of a culturally-determined tendency to dismiss them as lacking in artistic value as "aura". This viewpoint fails to comprehend insider views of *rasa* as an interactive, dynamic aesthetic and of multiplicity as a divine attribute; in treating mechanically reproduced "god pictures" as inferior examples of "art", Western aesthetic theory effectively erases their religious efficacy. (Pinney 2004: 18)

Indian aesthetic theory centers on *rasa*, the emotional and transformative impact of an image on its beholder, as springing from the image's power as theophany. *Rasa*'s efficacy is linked both with ritual adherence by the maker of the image, and with the beholder's sensitivity to the image's cultural and theological frames of reference. Formal Hindu iconography developed coextensively with temple worship, which was mediated by religious professionals and where images had an exclusively ritual value associated with their formal installation in a specific location. Mechanically reproduced images lend themselves to a democratic worship style; their transformative impact arrives from the relationship between the sensitive beholder and the subject of the image, not

instrument and a book, riding a swan; Lakshmi = goddess of prosperity and good fortune, four-armed, seated on a lotus; Kartikeya = war god, riding a peacock.

from the correct performance of specialized ritual.  In modern Hinduism, this democratic flexibility offers one solution to socioreligious problems of caste and gender.

Multiplicity in Hindu iconography represents the deity's ability to interact simultaneously on all levels of creation and to be equally present to every devotee.  From this perspective,  the multiple reproduction of a religious image enhances its efficacy and provides a basis for imagining a "broad, horizontal [religious] community" as in Anderson's model, and as illustrated in McDaniel's case study of Adya Ma Shakti.  The *shakti bhakti* tradition possesses a rich mythological "grammar" of the goddess as multiarmed, self-reproducing, and equally accessible to people of all castes, and religions.  This tradition is particularly well developed in Bengal, which was, historically, the locus of both goddess worship and British colonial power.  With the rise of colonial domination, the goddess' image emerged in bazaar art as a symbol both of resistance and of  a "family" solidarity embracing difference, her iconography combining warrior attributes with traditional "maternal" ones.

.	In the next chapter, I explore the genealogy of Bharat Mata from early temple sculpture to mechanically reproduced images of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. I inquire into the significance of her symbolism and power to represent an inclusive Hindu religious identity coterminous with the modern nation of India  Finally, I explore the relationship between the modern "imagination" of Hinduism as soothing socioreligious anxieties, and the changing religious and social roles of Hindu women in the late-colonial period.

# CHAPTER V

# ENGAGING THE IMAGES: TAKING THE RELIGIOUS ON ITS OWN TERMS

## Introduction

In *Deciphering the Signs of God: A Phenomenological Approach to Islam*, my late teacher Annemarie Schimmel refers to Friedrich von Hugel's remark that

> the spirit awakens when coming into contact with material things. That is, the highest spiritual experience can be triggered off by a sensual object: a flower, a fragrance, a cloud or a person. (Schimmel 1994:xii)

For Schimmel, Hugel's observation resonates with the Quranic statement "We put Our signs into the horizons and into themselves" (Sura 41:53); she points out that, for a Muslim, everything may be taken as an *aya*, a sign from God, and as evidence of the all-pervasive presence of a loving God who is the originator of everything. She discusses the phenomenological approach to religion as a process in which the scholar first considers the phenomena, then delves into ever-deeper layers of human response to the Divine, until at last one reaches the numinous core of each religion. (Schimmel 1994:xii)

As a scholar of Sufism, Professor Schimmel could unapologetically adopt a phenomenological model which drew the inquirer in from the periphery to the core, beginning with the world of nature and art and ending in realms of the ineffable. Hinduism differs from Islam in lacking a single clear theological position on the relation of God to the material world; nevertheless, and despite Western preconceptions of Hinduism as antimaterialistic, Schimmel's model is highly congruent with many Hindu approaches to spiritual practice. In the Shakta tradition of goddess-worship, the

phenomenal world is regarded as an emanation of the goddess' primordial power, or *shakti*; from this perspective, the world and everything in it is understood as the goddess' body, or as a series of veils which both conceal and reveal her as the ultimate ground of being. We should also recall that, as we saw in the last chapter, images of the goddess in their temple settings were commonly regarded by their worshippers as theophanies (Davis 1997: 17) and that the worshippers of Adya Shakti Kali experienced her as being literally present in her photograph. That is to say, "god photos" in modern Hinduism may be viewed as "windows to God" just as material things, in Sufism, may be taken as *ayat*, signs pointing to the divine. As we saw in the last chapter, in the discussion of *rasa* theory, Indian visual theory understands there to be a dynamic interaction between the the viewer's consciousness and the subject viewed. This is particularly true in relation to images of the divine, in which the spiritually-charged interaction known as *darshan* takes place: the viewer sees the deity in the picture, and the pictured deity *sees the viewer*. Whether or not the act of viewing is formally identified as worship, the viewer's consciousness is changed and shaped by the experience of viewing. In this chapter, I will approach my material with this perspective in mind.

I intend to study specific phenomena: a set of mechanically reproduced lithographic images of the goddess from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I do not expect thereby to reach the "numinous core" of Hinduism; my more modest intention is find out what narrative these images contribute to the collective imagining of modern Hinduism as it came into being in tension with colonialism.

## Durga the Demon Slayer: Symbol of Resistance

Below are three similar lithographs from the end of the nineteenth century and a photograph of a eighth century cave-temple sculpture. They all depict a woman warrior with multiple limbs, her hands holding a variety of weapons including a sword, a mace, a discus, a trident, a dagger, and a bowl of fire. In the lithographs, she rides a lion and faces two foes in the form of men, while a horned animal resembling a buffalo appears near the picture's bottom edge. In the sculpture, only one anthropomorphic foe is evident, but that figure is horned like a buffalo. As a close reading will show, these images are indeed related, but the "transformative meaning-making" process which they would have mobilized for contemporary viewers are not identical.

The first image, by an unknown artist, was printed in Germany by an unknown publisher. At an educated guess, it is the earliest of the three lithographs, circa 1890. From the 1880's to the 1920's it was common for Indian lithographic presses to import many of their images from Europe, where the process was more advanced and less costly than in India. Sometimes the artists were Europeans, working to Indian specifications; such images tended to be identifiably European in artistic technique although they represented Indian subjects. The dark, rich colors and the detailed modelling of the main figure's sari, of the leaves on the tree behind her, and of the intricate fern-like pattern on her saddle cloth all suggest either a European artist or an artist trained in European portraiture. The eyes and the features of the woman, the lion, and the primary adversary are realistically depicted, as are her nine pairs of arms and her elaborate jewelry. An eighteen-armed image is unusual in Indian art, and the attributes which she holds are jumbled and hard to identify; they seem to include flowers and leaves somewhat vaguely

rendered, rather than the weapons of the *Devi Mahatmya*. Her elaborate jewelry and crown make her features appear small, and nearly obscure her face. The vagueness of the her attributes and the elaborate jewelry further suggest that the producers of this image were unfamiliar with Durga's myth and iconography and that, being out of tune with her warrior energy, sought to make her more "feminine".

In this image, her eyes seem to gaze directly into those of the man whom she holds by the hair, and whose head she appears to be preparing to strike off. This man holds a sword in his right hand, but his hand is effectively stayed by the goddess' lowermost left hand. The eyes of the man in the lower right corner are closed, and his face is peaceful despite the lion biting his head. The sword has fallen from his lower hand and his tongue protrudes. Perhaps he is already dead. At the lowermost left corner of this picture there barely shows the head of a dark-hued horned animal. Its eyes are shut, and we cannot see the neck or body. It is far less realistically modeled than the lion or human figures. It might almost have been added as an afterthought, an impression strengthened by the fact that the fallen figure's thigh seems to show through the animal's face. There is no writing in this image.

The second image comes from the Ravi Vaibhav Press, Ghatkopar (West Mumbai), probably from the period 1910-1920. It is nearly an exact copy of a chromolithograph published in 1910 by the Ravi Varma Press (see Pinney 2004:111). The goddess here has only four pairs of arms. The colors of her clothing are brighter and the modelling of the background, saddlecloth and clothing is less subtle. The man whom she holds by the hair has acquired a dagger in his right hand; he is clearly attempting to stab the goddess with it, as his forward posture shows. In the first image he seemed to be

at bay; in this one he is actively opposing her. The man on the ground is not dead; his eyes are open as the lion bites and claws his body. Perhaps it is simply due to the printing process, but his eyes look blue. The horned animal in the picture's lower left quadrant has gained prominence. It is black (in the original, it is dun-colored), it clearly has the horns of a buffalo, and its head is obviously severed from its torso, possibly by the man on the ground, who grasps a sword in his left hand and looks toward the dead animal. This image contains both English and Marathi: the English captions "Registered 0063" and "Ravi Vaibhav Press Ghatkoper" flank the inscriptions "A.K. Joshi Ani Company" and "Ashtabhujadevi" ("the eight-armed goddess") in Devanagari script. Like the Smashana Kali image, it bears the (distributor's?) name Anant Shivaji Desai.

The third image is published by the Ravi Varma Press, Lonavla (Malavli). This image resembles the first one in the number of arms (nine pairs)[91] and in the placement and features of the main figures. The goddess' jewelry, drapery, weapons and saddle cloth all recall those in the first image, but they are simpler, slightly less detailed. The color are brighter and less saturated. The stock used for printing is lighter and flimsier than that in the first image. The eyes of the bottom figure are closed, his sword is fallen; the uppermost figure again holds a sword, but his hand is restrained by the goddess' grip. The eyes of the goddess and her adversary do not lock, as in the first picture; the goddess gazes downwards. She even appears a little bored. The horned figure in the lower left is again reduced to a head, but with this difference: the open eyes gaze beyond the picture's borders, drawing our attention to the right and outside the frame. This animal is not black or brown, but light-colored, like a cow. The captions at the bottom of this image are in

[91] Note that the figure identified as Ashtabhujadevi (eight-armed) has four *pairs* of arms, while the two identified as Mahishasuramardini have, most unusually, eight *pairs* of arms.

both English and Devanagari.  The English phrases “Registered No. 88C” and “Ravi Varma Press, Malavli” flank what appear to be Marathi names, and the central, largest inscription which reads “Mahishasuramardini.”  Finally, the example in the illustration is adorned with “jewels” in the form of glued-on colored beads; it is impossible to know whether these were added by the original seller or by the purchaser, but they add to the physical image’s status as an object of veneration.  It would be interesting to inquire further into the origins of this practice of adornment.

At first glance, all three lithographic images evoke the very well-known Puranic story of the goddess Durga and the buffalo demon Mahishasura.[92] In this story, the rulership of heaven has been usurped by Mahisha, an *asura* or “demon” whose natural form is a buffalo, and who can only be conquered by a woman.  Unable to restore the balance of power with purely masculine tactics, the male gods combine individual strengths to create a super-powerful, many-armed goddess called Durga.  Armed with weapons embodying the power of  each god, she rides into battle.  Durga is more than simply the sum of the male gods’ energies; as the ground of being itself, she can and does emanate additional  female warriors to assist her at crucial points in the battle.  Moreover, her form is infinitely fluid, able to take any shape and match any tactic of the buffalo demon’s.  After a dramatic shapeshifting duel, Durga and her lion deliver the deathblow to the buffalo demon: the lion pounces with teeth and claws while the goddess wields her sword and trident.  (Tartarkov and Dehejia,1984) This victorious moment, depicted in cave-temple sculpture throughout southern and western India from at least the sixth

[92] As recounted in the *Devi-Mahatmya*, part of the *Markandeya Purana*, this text was composed in Sanskrit around 400-500 C.E.  Versions of this story appear in the *Devi Bhagvatam* as well as in vernacular printed and oral traditions throughout India.

century C.E., gives the goddess one of her most celebrated Sanskrit names, Mahishasuramardini, the killer of Mashishasura. This victory marks the culminating celebration (Dussehra, “tenth day”) of the annual fall goddess festival, when its symbols permeate the streets of Calcutta in the form of songs, dramatic performances, *pujas*, and a steady parade of visual images.

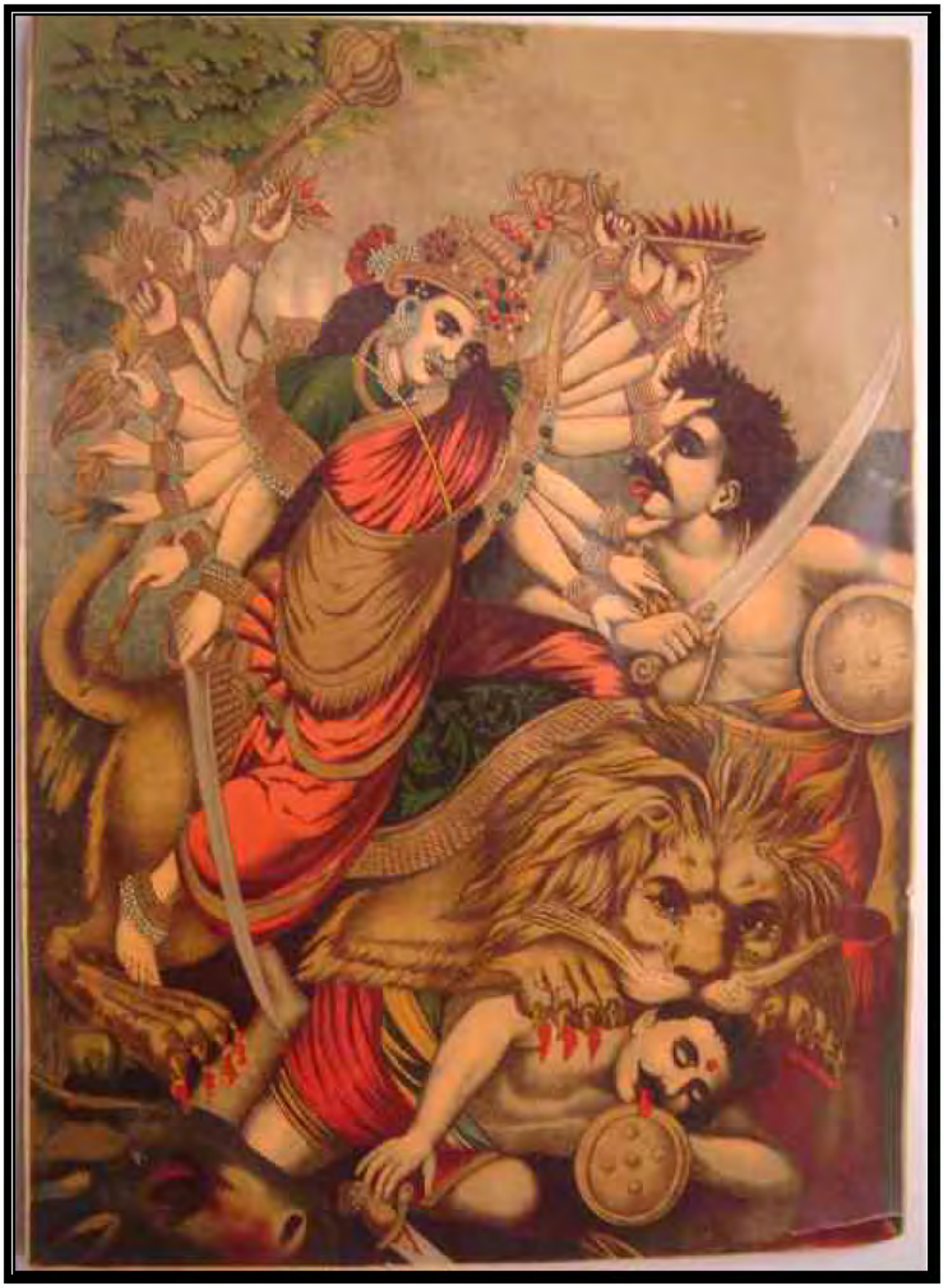


**Figure 20 Mahishasuramardini, German lithograph, 1890s**




**Figure 21 Mahishasuramardini, Indian lithograph, 1900s**




**Figure 22 Mahishasuramardini, embellished, Ravi Varma Press, 1900s**

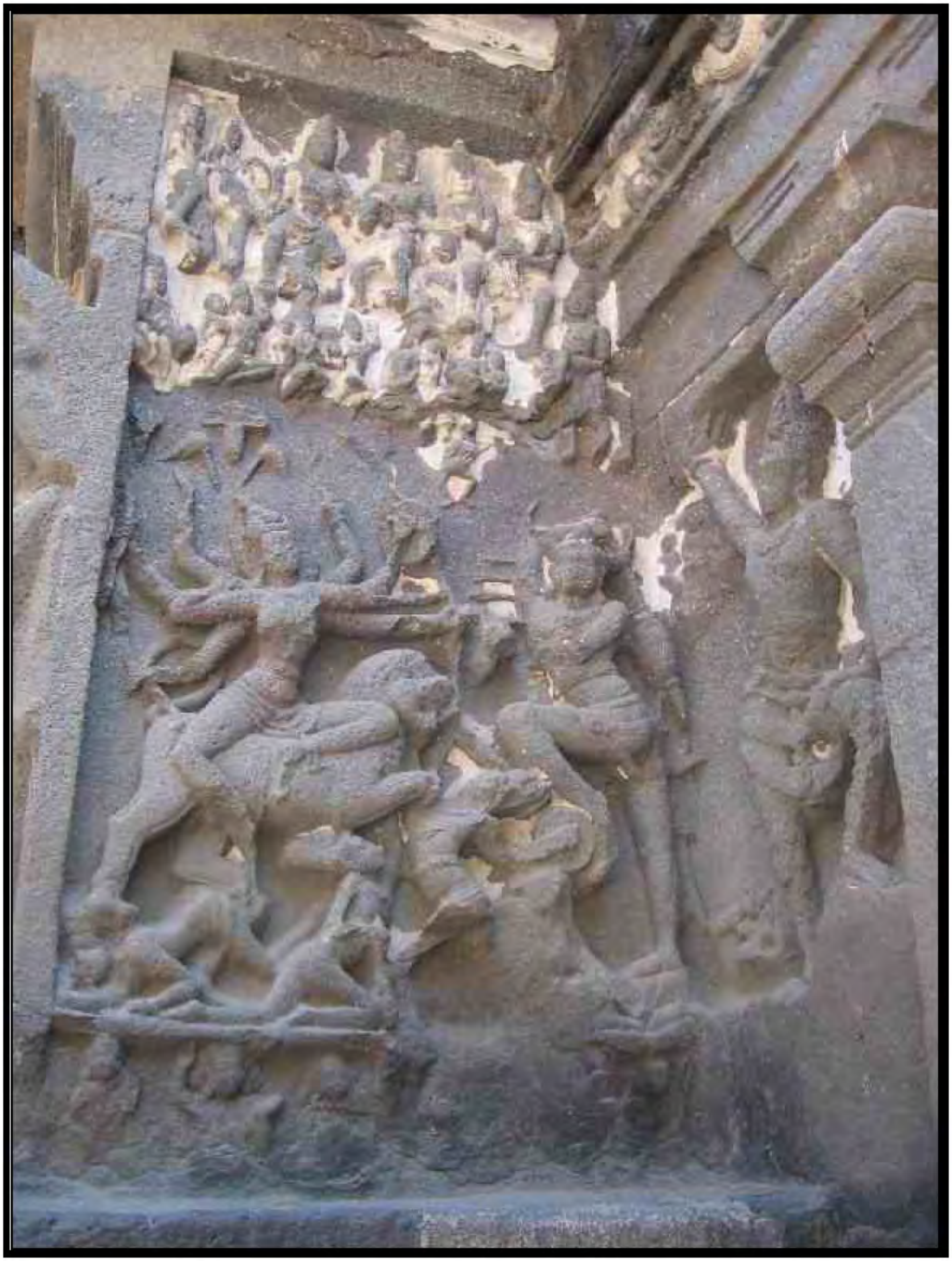


**Figure 23 Durga battling Mahishasura, Ellora, 7-9 centuries CE**

## Images as Meaning-making Symbols

As we saw in chapter 2, an image's transformative meaning depends on a complex interplay between the image's visual impact on the viewer, the context of viewing, and the viewer's consciousness. Images such as the cave sculpture of Mahishasuramardini and its lithographic descendants are, in Romila Thapar's phrase, *civilizational symbols.* They are religious in connotation (Thapar 1992: 70) and charged with mythic resonance, in the sense of "myth" as a narrative which expresses a culture's social assumptions, sense of shared identity, and its anxieties (Thapar 1992: 140, Lincoln 1996 (in Patton and Doniger, 168). A late-nineteenth or early twentieth-century Hindu viewing one of our lithographic examples would carry many related impressions in his or her consciousness: multiple hearings of the story of Durga's victory, memories of performances of that story, and the memory of other sculpted or painted images of the goddess' victory. For many Hindus in colonial India, not only would a visual depiction of a many-armed woman defeating a buffalo demon evoke cultural associations with the story of Durga, but for some, those associations might resonate with that person's experience of colonization. For people of a nationalistic bent, there would be obvious parallels between the buffalo demon's usurpation of heaven and the Europeans' imposition of foreign rule. Thus, for some viewers, the image's primarily religious meaning would expand to embrace a personal political dimension, whether or not the artist or publisher intended that reading. However, the use of "Ashtabhuja devi" as a caption in our 1910 example might suggest an intention on the publisher's part to foster an association in Maharashtrian viewers' minds between the image and Veer Savarkar's militant anti-British stance.

Moreover, the conjunction of these symbols is far more ancient even than Durga's story as told in the *Devi Mahatmya*, although this was common currency across India by at least the sixth century CE. Indian cultural historian Pupul Jayakar identifies seals from the Harappan civilization (ca. 3000 – 1500 BCE) which bear images of a woman, assumed to be a goddess, "in mysterious dialogue with the tiger" as well as riding, or perhaps being transformed into, a horned animal resembling a buffalo, as important cultural symbols. She writes,

> These recurrent symbols nourish the Indian unconscious, the source of the classical as well as the "little tradition" of field and forest. In later centuries these symbols were were translated in the hand of the artisan into cult images and icons…(Jayakar 1990:57)

In a similar vein, art historian Raju Kalidos makes the case for a Sakti tradition which, despite apparent intermittent breaks of continuity at the level of elite literature and temple worship, persisted uninterrupted at the folk level. (Kalidos 2006: 147) In his view,

> The Goddess tradition in India is as old as its history. Evidences of terracotta figurines…discovered in Kulli, Zhob and Harappa (Basham 1971:15)…[suggest] that the Mother Goddess cult had deep roots in Indian religious tradition…The Sakti cult in India is as old as 2500 B.C. (Kalidos 2006: 145)

Kalidos identifies twenty-five types of Durgas identified with the great Mother, Devi, in her role as slayer of demons (Kalidos 2006: 13) and associated with iconographical representations in temples of the period (*Ibid.*, p. 148). He argues that the personality and over 160 epithets which appear in the *Devimahatmya*[93] point to folk-level foundations of her cult as a cosmic symbol. He writes:

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[93] The *Devimahatmya*, an integral part of the *Markandeya Purana*, is a treasury of iconographical information related to the Sakti goddesses. Being a text meant for *puja* recitation, it contains many ritual details, and its retelling of the story of Devi contains a wealth of iconographical data…Forms of the Sakti

> Certain of the Devi's epithets…are personifications of abstract concepts. Laksmi symbolizes wealth, Dharmacarini 'righteousness' and Durga 'victory'. Bhudevi is a personification of the natural force, earth, and …soil…Devi above all is the creatrix that has been cast in art media in a way unparalleled in the history of world religions...Through her various manifestations in art, Sakti [i.e., the Devi] represents the grand total of India's philosophies frozen into lithic tablets…Through her various iconic forms, Sakti thematises the mysteries of life and poses an eternal challenge… (*Ibid.*, p. 150-151)

Thus, the problem is avoided of asking whether there is one goddess or many goddesses; from this perspective, there is one ground of being or power, *sakti*, which is identical with the Devi, and which manifests in various forms according to circumstances.

Although the goddess is explicitly identified as Mahishasuramardini in our third example, the name Ashtabhuja ("eight-handed") Devi deserves notice as an example of conscious homology between Sanskrit ("greater") and village ("lesser") traditions, and requires a brief excursion into politics. This "folk tradition" form of the goddess was the family deity of Damodar (Veer, "hero") Savarkar (1883-1966), the central icon of Hindu nationalist/separatist political ideology for his generation. Born near Nasik, Maharashtra, Savarkar developed the ideology of Hindutva ("Hindu-ness"), which called for a separate Hindu *rashtra* (nation). As a radical college student, in 1905 – the year of Bengal's first partition - he organized a public bonfire of foreign goods and cloth to celebrate Dussehra (the culminating day of the nine-day goddess festival, commemorating her victory over Mashishasura), and popular legend depicts him vowing before an image of Ashtabhuja Devi to free India or die trying. An advocate of violent revolution, he was later charged

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Goddesses…are the following: Mahalaksmi, Mahasarasvati, Argala, Mahakali, Durga, Raktadantika, Sakambhari, Brahmari, Mahamari, and Ratridevi…" (Kalidos, Raju, *Encyclopedia of Hindu Iconography: Early Medieval Vol. III Sakti Goddesses, p. 8* – Sharada Publishing House, Delhi, 2006)

with having planned the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, but was acquitted for lack of evidence.

In the image identified as Ashtabhuja Devi, the buffalo – which appears to be nearly an afterthought in the first, German image – is prominent. The ground beneath its severed head is bloody. The positioning of the male figures suggest that they have killed it, and that the Devi is about to kill them in retaliation, radically altering the well-known narrative of Durga and the buffalo demon. The allegorical and political implications of this very popular image were not lost on the British government. A version published by the Ravi Varma Press in 1910 (not shown; see Pinney 2004: 111), not only depicts the lower "demon" figure as having blood on his sword, but the animal is not black, like a buffalo, but dun-colored, like a cow. Thus, between December 1911 and January 1912 the Bombay Government proscribed this image and matchboxes bearing a "similar but less mischievous picture", in accordance with the 1910 India Press Act, as

> [c]ontain[ing] visible representation likely to incite to acts of violence and to bring into hatred and contempt certain classes of His Majesty's subjects in British India… (Notification by E.A. deBrett, Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner, Central Provinces, Nagpur, 23 January 1912. National Archives of India, file no. 86-104/February 1912, B, Home Pol. Cited in Pinney 2004: 110)

The government interpreted this image as a call to arms against cow-slaughter, which was indeed a sensitive issue and a prominent one for Hindu reformers, particularly Dayananda Sarasvati and the Arya Samaj. The issue was that most Hindus were vegetarians and revered the cow as a sacred animal. Muslims and the British, on the other hand, were notorious beef-eaters, with the British army being one of the largest consumers in India of cow's flesh. An additional sore point for Hindus was the annual Muslim feast of Id al-Bakr, which requires the ritual sacrifice of a horned animal in

commemoration of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac. On this day, hundreds if not thousands of cows were killed in preference to goats, as the cheaper animals. (Van der Veer, 1994: 92) Cow protection sentiment reached its peak in 1893, when public demonstrations were held in Nagpur, Hardwar and Benares to denounce cow-slaughter. These included plays dramatizing the suffering of cows and the distribution of printed pamphlets demonizing those who sacrificed and ate them. Communal violence broke out between Hindus and Muslims in the Azamgarh district of Northern India (Freitag 1987). While there is no record of lithographed images playing a role in the Azamgarh riots, the use of pamphlets by cow-protection advocates demonstrates their awareness of the print medium in mobilizing popular sentiment. The government's reaction to the Ravi Vaibhav Ashtabhuja Devi image was, therefore, grounded in recent experience.

Regarding this image, art historian Christopher Pinney favors "a reading that constructs [this image] as the goddess' retribution upon two Muslim or Untouchable butchers who have just slaughtered a cow" (Pinney 2004: 112), similar to the colonial government's reading. However, the question arises: why *two* Muslims, or Untouchables? If we refer to Figure 4, the cave sculpture, we notice that there is only one human-like figure facing the Devi; this configuration is characteristic of most sculpture identified as Mahishasuramardini. The story of the Devi's destruction of the demon brothers Sumbha and Nisumbha was not popular with artists in the north. In the south, relatively few though dramatic temple sculptures honor her as Nishumbhasudani (the slayer of Nishumbha). A ninth-century example from Tanjur depicts her facing a standing demon with sword and shield, while a second demon is trampled beneath her feet. (Dehejia 1999: 217). However, the "classic" image contains only one protagonist.

Some sculptural representations from medieval Hindu temples, as well as some paintings closer in time, use the convention of a human form emerging from the mouth of the fallen buffalo's body. The image below, in nineteenth-century Kalighat style, clearly shows the anthropomorphized demon emerging from the buffalo's neck. Some such images of the emergent demon give the impression of a recumbent figure flanked by a standing figure, as we see in the three lithographs. In the lithographs both the recumbent figure and the standing figure are human, while the buffalo is barely visible in the lower left corner of the visual field. Whether artists trained in Western realism took artistic license to transform the fallen buffalo into a fallen human, only inserting the buffalo's head as an afterthought, or whether they intended a reference to the tale of the goddess' victory over Shumbha and Nishumbha[94] is impossible to determine at this distance. Whatever the reason, the lithographic image popularly identified as Mahishasuramardini doubles the "demon" figure. I suggest that the doubling was intentional, and that it intended to refer to the two communities known for their beef consumption, the British and the Muslims. In the Bombay Government's reading of the 1910 Ravi Varma image as posing a danger to "certain classes of His Majesty's subjects," then, one of those classes would have been themselves.

[94] Or, for that matter, some other pa ir of demons. There are 18th century paintings which depict the goddess battling two demons, not necessarily Shumbha and Nishumbha. (Jinah Kim, personal communication)



**Figure 24 Mahishasuramardini, Kalighat style**

Ravi Varma Press, the publisher of the Ashtabhujadevi lithograph, explained its publication of this "mischievous" image by claiming that the Government had misunderstood its religious context. A few years before these events, Rajah Ravi Varma had sold his interest in the business to Fritz Schleicher, a German who had worked there since 1894, first as a litho transfer artist, now as the owner/manager. Schleicher responded to the government's proscription with a petition denying that the picture was an "anti-cow-killing document". He produced a hermeneutic identifying Ashtabhujadevi with Mahishasuramardini and introduced the character of "Mahishasura's general, Bidalaksha" to explain the doubled man-form. Schleicher's petition claimed that "it is erroneous to interpret the two demons shown in the picture as butchers and …erroneous to interpret that they are…decapitating a cow." (Pinney 2004:110) In the end, Schleicher agreed to withdraw the lithograph with the light-colored, cowlike animal, replacing it with one showing a black, more buffalo-like animal, and with the blood expunged from the lower figure's sword, as in our Figure 2. This image was then copied by other publishers, such as the Ravi Bhairav Press, and widely distributed throughout Maharashtra and other parts of India. The caption "Ashtabhuja Devi" remained unaltered, leaving us with the tantalizing possibility that an example of this image could have been the one in whose presence Veer Savarkar vowed to end British rule by violence if necessary.

Cosmic Cow Iconography as Mother and Dharma

In chapter 2 we saw another image from the same era, circa 1910, also from the Ravi Bhairav Press in Ghatkopar (Bombay Presidency, present-day Maharashtra). This one depicted the cosmic cow Aditi/Kamadhenu[95] as the giver of milk (and, consequently, as mother) to members of the Parsi, Hindu, Muslim, and European communities. That cow is menaced, on the right of the picture, by a sword-wielding demon, with the caption above its head "He manusayaho! Kaliyugi mansahari jivom ko dekho" ("Hey mankind, look at the meat-eating souls of the Kaliyuga") while a figure identified as Dharmaraj fends him off, saying "Don't kill the cow, everyone is dependent on it" ("Mat maro gai sarv ka jivan hai"). At the picture's top left, a Hindu priest recites Sanskrit shlokas. The visual message is clear: members of all four communities share peacefully and equally in the bounty of Mother Cow; *everyone* is dependent on her. Her body depicts the universe, encompassing Hindu deities as well as the sun, the moon, mountains and lakes, but this is an inclusive space, as evidenced by the male Hindu figure who pours milk for everyone and by the blessing of the priest above. Anyone who would threaten the cow, and the peaceful, inclusive universe delineated by her body, is clearly a demon.

The figure below, circa 1880-1890, is a "trade label" printed by the Glasgow firm William Stirling & Sons (founded 1750). This cow, too, contains deities in her body as well as mountains and an ocean. Like the cow in the previous image, she recalls Aditi ("Unlimited"), the Vedic goddess who is the mother of all existence, including the quarters of space and the deities. (Doniger 2009:127) As the mother of all things, the *Rg*

[95] Aditi = unbounded; cosmic cow as ground of being for all living things; Kamadhenu = fulfiller of wishes; cow as source of bounty, nourishment, communal good

*Veda* identifies her with the cow and attributes "maternal" qualities such as purity, mildness, and selflessness to her. "Do not kill the sinless cow, the Aditi," exhorts one hymn (RV VIII.101, 15, cited in Oldenberg 1993:105).




**Figure 25 Cosmic cow, menaced, trade label, ca 1880s**

At the extreme right of the frame is a male figure whose upraised sword seems to threaten the cow. This figure is not demonic, as in the previous image, but human. He wears a red *dhoti* and a red-and-white turban. He has a moustache, but no beard, suggesting that he is a Hindu, not a Muslim. His advance is warded off by a yellow-clad

male figure whose green skin suggests that he represents Lord Ram, the personification of a *dharma raja,* who is often green-skinned in Hindu iconography. This figure's stance, holding up two hands, recalls the priest in the previous image. The cow's tongue licks his head appreciatively. Four small figures hold up their vessels for milk, which is poured by a figure who, by his clothing and hair style, appears to be Hindu; the Englishman, identifiable by his top hat and frock coat, appears to be kneeling in supplication. Three female figures, equal in scale to the *dharma raja*, attract the viewer's gaze. One, wearing a red veil, performs *puja* at the cow's front feet. Although she looks only at the flowers she is offering, her body is partly interposed between the menacing swordsman and the *dharma raja*, whose figure she partly obscures. Despite the threat of an armed man behind her, her gaze and her attention are one-pointed on her devotions. One feels that her diligence in worship acts to protect her and the cow from real harm. The second woman, clad in a dark-blue sari, sits at the cow's udder and directs a stream of milk into the vessel in her lap. At her back stands a smaller male figure, Hindu in appearance, who distributes milk. The third woman stands behind the cow's flank, in a position similar to that occupied by the priest in the previous image. Like the priest, she raises one hand, perhaps warning off the swordsman; or is she making the *abhaya* ("fear not") gesture? Her face appears friendly and her gaze is slightly elevated. We cannot be quite sure whether her gaze and gesture are directed to the swordsman or the cow.

There appears to be a progression from, or at any rate a relationship between, the two images, whose exact age it is beyond the scope of this project to determine. A comparison of the two raises more questions than can be answered here. Is the undated trade label the source for the (presumably) later, better known lithograph? Is there a

common visual source? In *Photos of the Gods* Christopher Pinney speaks of an image published by P.C. Biswas of Calcutta (107) as "one of the earliest" images to be taken up by the Cow Protection movement of the 1890s, but he does not reproduce it. Sandria Freitag (below) mentions an image of a cow being menaced by an armed figure. Where might these images fit in our continuum? Why are there no women in the Ravi Vaishav lithograph, when there are three so prominently featured in the trade label? What is the significance of the Englishman's having changed from a kneeling, supplicant posture to being the only figure seated on anything other than the ground? What does it mean that the sword-wielding figure has been transformed from a human figure with a somewhat diffident posture to an actively challenging demon? Such questions are beyond the scope of this project, and must perhaps be answered by art historians.

If we juxtapose the five lithographic images, we may ask further about the relationship between the sword-wielding figure in the "cosmic cow" lithographs and the Mahishasuramardini lithographs, the transformation of the demonic figure back to human form, and the relationship of slain buffalo to protected cow. Taken with the Ellora sculpture, these images help to illustrate the intertextual, or "family resemblance", model of Hinduism by revealing points of relationship among the images, and the connection of the images to oral and written texts. One *caveat* as we proceed: we must not mistake these images for simple illustrations of, or adjuncts to, written texts. With Pinney, Freitag and Ramaswamy, I contend that the images themselves "do" something; as Eck suggests, I take them as "texts" in their own right. While I am deeply interested in the relationship of these visual texts to written texts, I do not seek to legitimize the visual by seeking a

written source for it. Rather, I seek to explore the intertextual relationship between the visual and the written.

Doniger (2009) speaks of intertextuality as a tool for recognizing texts that refer to other texts, and as illuminating "the many ways in which a single text has been read over the centuries, by people of different castes, genders, and individual needs or desires." Applying the intertextual model to our images, a complex of culturally resonant symbols emerge, involving a woman, a horned animal, and a sword. The identity of the players shifts according to the needs of the historical context, but, like a palimpsest, earlier layers show through the later ones. Doniger also offers a model for thinking about myth in terms of metastory, the "bare bones" elements which are fleshed out with detail in varying ways according to historical and cultural context. In this series we can see two metastories: "A woman kills a demon in the form of a buffalo," (or even: "A woman kills a buffalo") and "A *dharmaraja* protects a cow from a demon[96]."

In the Mahishasuramardini story, as in the Ellora image, a multi-armed woman, independent of male control, riding a lion and bearing weapons, kills a buffalo *asura* who menaces her world. In some depictions of her victory, such as the Kalighat painting above, the dying *asura's* spirit emerges in human form from the head or mouth of the buffalo-body; in the Ellora image, the woman faces an anthropomorphic, horned figure. In the three lithographs, the armed human figure and the buffalo figure are separated and the human figure is doubled: the woman faces an armed man, while another armed man lies at her feet, next to the body (or, at least, the head) of a decapitated buffalo. In the image identified as Ashtabhujadevi, the color of the buffalo and the blood on the sword

of the lower armed man, invite a reading of the image as protest against cow slaughter. Unpacking both stories, we find that they contain a number of common elements: horned animal; death by decapitation or the threat of such a death; protection; familial or cultural group; demon; and *dharma*. If we take the images as a family, the metastory shifts from "A woman kills a buffalo (horned animal) demon, thereby restoring *dharma*" to "A man protects a cow (horned animal) from being killed by a demon, thus protecting *dharma*."

In both stories, protection is a key motif. A woman protects *dharma* by killing a horned animal which embodies *adharmic* forces; a man protects a horned animal which embodies *dharma*. There is a tension, clearly evident in these two stories, between the feminine as needing protection, and the feminine as protector. As we saw in chapter 2, the idea of protecting female bodies (from intrusive attentions of male doctors, for example) was, in the public's mind, clearly linked with the protection of *dharma* for the Hindu community, and with the related concept of '*izza* – honor – for Muslims. However, the image of Durga/Kali as the slayer of the buffalo demon resonates with a deeprooted cultural conviction that, in times of crisis, goddesses can be more powerful than gods (Nandy 2002:151-152) and that the Mother is fully autonomous and able to protect herself and her children if she chooses. A wellknown story about Swami Vivekananda, illustrating the issue of who is protector/who is protected, speaks emphatically of the goddess' power. In 1898 Vivekananda visited Kashmir, where he was distressed to see many temples destroyed and their images (*murtis)* overthrown. Sitting in the ruins of a Kali temple, he inwardly upbraided those responsible for its destruction and vowed that if he had been there, he would never have allowed the Mother's abode to be so dishonored.

[96] Swami Dayananda 's arguments against cow-killing had two main points: a live cow provides food for thousands of people in the long run, while a dead cow feeds only a few; and one of the duties of a king is to

Why, he asked, did she tolerate such vandalism? In his heart, he heard her answer: "What is it to you, Vivekananda, if the invader breaks my images? Do you protect me, or do I protect you?" (cited in Gandhi 1992:11)

The theme of protection is nowhere more central than in the symbolism surrounding cows. The term *gotra* (cow-pen, the protective enclosure which prevents cattle from straying or being harmed or stolen) refers also to the family and clan unit, while the kinship term *duhitr (*daughter) is derived from the root *duh*, "to milk" (Sharma 1985:141); one's family, then, is coextensive with those who are protected within the "cow-pen". Brahmanic literature contains frequent references to the cow as *Aditi* ("the unbounded", supreme nature) and *Prithvi* ("earth")[97] and as representative of supreme value, both material and spiritual. Hymn X of the *Atharva Veda* says, speaking of the cosmic Cow: "She hath become this universe, Fathers, and Rishis, hath become the Gods, and men, and Asuras." (Griffith, Ralph T.H., trans. "The Hymans of the Atharvaveda". 1895-6. Accessed July 10, 2010. <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/av/index.htm>)

The association of the cow with *dharma* is deeply rooted. In the *Visnu Purana* the progression of the *yugas*, or macro-cycles of time, during which *dharma*

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prevent the destruction of useful animals, because the people depend on them. (See Jordens 1978:219)

[97] In both "cosmic cow" lithographs, it is clear that the cow's body encompasses the earth: it contains mountains, waters, trees, the sun and the moon. The *Atharva Veda* explicitly associates the earth-as-goddess *(Prithvi)* with the cow-as-mother:

> May Earth the goddess,
> She who bears her treasure stored up in many a place…
> Grant great possessions to us
> Bestowing them with love and favor
> Earth…pour like a constant cow that never fails
> A thousand streams of treasure to enrich me. (AV, Book XII, Hymn I, shlokas 44-45; cited in Wangu: 35)

progressively declines, are likened to the legs of a cow. As Lipner explains this homology:

> In the first age or *satya yuga*, …*dharma* or the socio-religious order, likened sometimes to a sacred cow, is firmly established on four legs. Human passions are generally kept at bay in this age, the rules of the caste hierarchy are respected, and even human sensibilities and capacities are heightened…[I]n the *satya yuga* the deities are worshipped [directly] in their visible form…There is no need for images or temples. But there is an inexorable decline of *dharma*. This is the result of human beings allowing their passions to get out of control. Goodness, in its naturalistic and moral senses, progressively declines, and the world becomes more prone to disorder…in the… *treta yuga* in which the sacred cow of *dharma* is more or less steady on three legs. In due course the …*dvapara yuga* begins, where *dharma* balances on two legs. As human sensibilities…wane the deities are worshipped in their visible form less and less, and through fashioned images more and more. The veil between mundane existence and the transcendent is darkening. Finally, the *kali yuga* sets in…[and] *dharma* wobbl[es] on one leg only. (Lipner 1994: 252-253)

In the *kali yuga*, the deities become invisible, and (therefore?) image-worship prevails. Outer trappings are confused with inner religion. Wealth becomes the source of virtue, property confers rank, falsehood confers success, and marriages are founded solely on sexual passion. Whereas the human diet in the *satya yuga* was exclusively vegetarian, in the *kali yuga* things have degenerated to the point that not only do people eat meat, they eat cows – an act tantamount to cannibalism by *satya yuga* standards. The view prevails in modern Hindu culture that we are currently living in the *kali* yuga.

The four-legged cow, then, represents things as they are when there is good alignment between human actions and divine law. The word *dharma* derives from the root *dhr*, “to hold”; *dharma* is that which holds this world and its denizens together. It is a stable space. It contains the tension between order and chaos (Lipner 2004: 197). *Dharma* is also divine law, and the practice by which individuals align their actions with that law. Actions that sustain humanity and contribute to its wellbeing, that promote

harmony and end conflict, are *dharma*; actions that create conflict and promote disunity are *adharma*.

The cow is a symbol of security and well-being when its resources and power are properly harnessed for the common good. In the trade label, we see people treating the cow with respect and affection, as the cow provides milk to representative members of different communities to be found in India. This point is important. The artist has made no effort to depict people who might live outside of India, or all the world's denizens; the people who receive milk are specifically and identifiably Muslim, Hindu, Parsi, and English, and they are related through their milk-communion as children of one mother. The cow's body, inhabited as it is by deities, mountains, rivers, and trees, represents not only "the earth" (*Prithvi)* as an abstract sense of cosmos, but a specific world, the subcontinent then known as Hindoostan and now as India. In a sense, the cow's body is the *gotra*, both the space which contains and protects the family, and the family itself. The image of a four-legged, well-cared for cow which provides milk equally to all her "children" suggests a state of affairs in which all the inhabitants of India-as-*gotra* can live together harmoniously, each fulfilling their personal *dharma* as Hindu, Christian, Muslim, or Parsi, but acting toward a common good[98]. The cow is menaced by the

[98] As we have seen, the concept of *dharma* is multivalent; *dharma* operates on both the individual and transpersonal levels. While there are overarching principles known as *mahavakyas*, "great vows," which apply to all persons at all times, specific codes of conduct for members of different communities are known to vary. The picture suggests a state of affairs in which individual or community-bound duties are subordinated to the needs of the time, when *dharma* is under threat, and *sva-dharma* (one's own *dharma)* must serve the needs of *sanatana dharma*. The picture thus makes the quasi-theological claim that Hinduism, as *sanatana dharma,* is a universally applicable philosophy or teaching: although in terms of *svadharma* for Muslims and Parsis there is nothing wrong with killing and eating cows, this picture says that *no one* should kill the cow because she is our common mother; *everyone* should respect *sanatana dharma* because its claims are universally applicable. (See Lipner 1994, 220-221, on *svadharma* and *sanatana dharma*.)

swordsman, sometimes identified as Kali, the eponymous demon of the degenerate Kaliyuga in which people eat meat.

In talking about "demons," it must be emphasized that *asuras* in Hindu mythology are not the hell-spawn of Christianity. *Asuras* and *devas* ("shining ones," "keepers of light") are brothers (Pattanaik 2000: 154), and they are one another's opposite numbers without either side being understood as all good or all bad.[99] Not only are the devas and *asuras* brothers, but the cow/earth/*Prithvi* is their common mother. According to mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik:

> There is no Satan in Hindu lore…The asuras are merely anti-devas, opposing everything the "gods" do. The gods ensure the flow of *rasa* [essence, spirit]. The demons block it. The demons represent darkness, disorder, desire, bondage, and barrenness… (Pattanaik 2000:154)

The Mahishasuramardini story is less a clear-cut "bad guys/good guys" story, than a story about power out of joint with natural rhythms and the need for cosmic re-balancing by a figure who is the very embodiment of power (*Shakti)* and who thus contains and transcends such dyads as *deva/asura.* It is not a revenge story, but a story in which some of the children have gone out of control and the mother must put everyone to rights for the common good. The *Devi Mahatmya* presents the goddess/mother figure as the culmination of the combined efforts, attributes and best thinking of multiple male deities. She personifies a collaborative response to a situation in which no one strand of religion or culture is adequate, similar to the challenges which colonialism posed to Hindu *dharma*. The myth tells us that a combined effort, a collective identity, has greater power, agency and efficacy than individual responses. The goddess' multiple arms and multiple weapons represent a wealth of energies drawn from multiple sources

and synthesized into one super-energy which is, above all things, active. This feminine form embodies the power to effect change. Her body also evokes the idea of mother, less in the nurturing sense than in the sense of a lioness protecting her cubs, a symbol which is emphasized by the active presence of her lion *vahana*, or "vehicle."

The "cosmic cow" lithographs make an important theological statement about Hindu *dharma* as primary and comprehensive. Aditi, the cosmic cow who carries all deities within her body, may be read as a graphic representation of modern Hinduism as *sanatana dharma*. What is contained within the *gotra*, or "cowpen", of *dharma* includes symbols of the primary Hindu traditions: Brahma, Shiva, Vishnu, and the Devi are all evident within Mother Cow's body, along with certain "lesser tradition" mythological figures such as Shiva Bhairava, Hanuman (Maruti) and Rahu, and the important Vedic deity Agni. Sarasvati, goddess of wisdom and learning, appears just under the cow's right ear, identified both by a caption and by her *vina*. Just above the cow's tail, Lakshmi, personification of prosperity, can be seen seated on her lotus throne. These lithographs, then, provide evidence of what values were important in the imagination of a modern commual identity for Hindus. They suggest that *dharma* embraces all varieties of religious practice which coexisted within the simultaneously sacred and physical space of India, and that the "wisdom" secreted by the cow's nipples is freely available to members of all religious communities, not only Hindus. This inclusive vision of Hinduism as *sanatana dharma* allowed leaders as different as Gandhi and Tilak to self-identify as *sanatani* Hindus, and undergirded Gandhi's goal of an egalitarian nation, founded on spiritual principles, which would offer equal shelter to all her inhabitants. Although a

[99] In some versions of the Mahishasura story, the buffalo demon is a devotee of Durga's who longs to be killed by her because such a death will benefit him spiritually.

more divisive narrative prevailed, it is important for us as religious scholars to take note that there was another narrative, and to recognize it in these images of Hindu *dharma* not as political hegemony, but as cosmic harmony.

Comparatively little scholarship exists on "cosmic cow" images, but of the existing literature, much concentrates on their use by cow-protection activists. From this perspective, it is easy to see them only as fomenting communal division by pitting vegetarian Hindus against meat-eating Muslims and Christians. Those scholars (Pinney, Freitag, Ramaswamy, Jain) who have considered them have focused almost exclusively on the sociopolitical implications of cow images - specifically, on the mobilization of such images by such movements as the Arya Samaj's Cow Protection League and, later, Hindu-chauvinistic nationalist groups, to dramatize the Hindu community's need for protection from non-Hindus. While recognizing the role of these images in the development of "Mother India" as a symbol of divinity and nationality (Pinney 2004: 108), this scholarship focuses on the "demonization" of the beef-eating Muslim and lower-caste Hindu communities (Pinney 107) rather than the role of goddess iconography as a unifying symbol for the emerging pan-Indian Hindu identity.

Pinney refers to "cosmic cow" images as "visual records of the foundational violence that…accompanies much locality building." (2004:107) He writes:

> Cow Protection involved a struggle not only over a 'sacred symbol' but also, locally, over 'sacred spaces' and the specificity of local struggles also forged new senses of community…At a regional level this spatialization took the form of a network of messengers and travelling preachers who could rapidly disseminate the cause over wide areas…This colonization of quotidian space replicated the infestation of the body of the cow itself with the divine; in numerous lithographs the cow becomes a proto-nation, a space that embodies a Hindu cosmology. …In much of the visual imagery the cow encompassed all the gods, but was also depicted as succouring all the diversity of India's communities. In practice, however, and in the use made of these images, a more discriminatory message

> was stressed in which the cow came to represent a Hindu identity and nationality that required protection from non-Hindus…[T]he cow became an exclusive symbol that was also grounded simultaneously in an exclusional foundational violence, which marked out Islam and Untouchable beef-eating practices as incompatible with this new space of the cow-nation. (2004:107)

In a similar vein, historian Sandria Freitag cites an account of a cow-protection meeting held in Azamgarh district in 1894 as an example of how meanings were constructed through the consumption of images:

> …[P]articipants were exhorted to protect the cow. A cow picture, representing the residence of all the Hindu gods, was placed on a stool before the platform and copies of it were circulated. The speaker …told [his listeners] that the cow was a "universal mother" since every man drank cow's milk. It was therefore "matricide" to kill a cow. Since the picture included a man, taken by Muslims and Hindus alike to represent a Muslim, with a drawn sword, the lesson was obvious. To prevent such matricide, the participants would agree to establish a Sabha, adopt rules, and choose officers…(Freitag 1987: 131)

The *sabhas* (community organizations) could then bring community pressure to bear, by offering benefits to butchers if they would give up their trade in cattle, by boycotting Muslims, and even compelling Muslim butchers to sign agreements promising not to sacrifice cows during the *Id* festival (Freitag 1987:132). Freitag makes the important point that the Cow Protection movement had two "horns", if you will, to its argument, one sacred, one more secular. Swami Dayananda's Gaurakshini Sabha, founded 1882, was a *sanatani* religious organization, whose publications emphasized the cow's symbolic value. Not only was the cow sacred in itself, but its byproducts were essential to most Hindu rituals. However, cow protection also offered Westernized Hindus an opportunity to "defend an important facet of Indian life in terms deemed legitimate by the Western world," (*Ibid.,* p. 129) because of the cow's unarguable importance in an agrarian economy. Nevertheless, the sacred side of the argument was the more compelling. In 1888, when the Northwestern High Court declared that a cow

was not a sacred object, the decision was met with passionate protest and a strengthening of the Cow Protection movement throughout India. The force of the cow's religious resonance, Freitag says, "is made clearer still by the quite conscious avowal, of the various groups arrayed along the Hindu spectrum, to work together in defense of the cow." *(Ibid.*, p. 127)

For a student of religion, the real importance of cow images lay in their power as symbols to organize heterogeneous religious views in relation to a central point. They provided a focus for the question of who was a "real" Hindu, by posing that question through the lens of the cow as a symbol for, or embodiment of, *dharma*. The images of we have been considering, of the cosmic cow bearing deities and universes in her body, can be read as visual hermeneutics. Their theological content is not simply "the …inscription of the sacred onto the body of the disputed sign" (Pinney 2004:107), the grafting of archaic religious symbolism onto politically-conceived images to make them more inflammatory. Their evocation of cow as mother, cow as *dharma*, cow as sacred physical space, threatened by the citizens of an *adharmic* age, draws on deeply-rooted sacred cultural symbols. Understanding the depth of these images' psychological and religious power helps us to grasp the force of *sanatani* Hinduism for Hindus engaged in the "India-wide impetus to define one's community" (Freitag 1987:226) and to articulate the defining qualities of a "true Hindu."

In the *Shakta* tradition, the physical world is regarded as an emanation of the goddess' power, even as her body itself. We have considered a set of images which present the world, or at any rate the "world" of India, in religious terms, as the body of the cosmic cow-mother Aditi, also understood to be the embodiment of *dharma*. We

juxtaposed these images with a series of images in which the mother goddess, portrayed as a woman warrior, kills a demon whose *adharmic* actions have threatened the world. This demon, according  to Puranic stories, has the form of a buffalo; however, in late-colonial lithographs, the representation of the buffalo seems to overlap with the culturally resonant image of the cow, to produce a reading in which the goddess is, in effect, acting in self-defense.  The goddess-as-warrior is seen to be defending the goddess-as-cow mother.  Whatever the intentions of the original artist may have been, the pictures tell a story that is different from the one in the *Devi Mahatmya*.

Both sets of images, then, say that *dharma* is threatened and must be protected. That is to say, "the world" is threatened – the religious world, and identity, that we are trying to build in the face of colonial power and modernity.  Moreover, the physical world is the goddess' body.  Action is called for, but in what mode: battlefield defender of the mother, or guardian of her peace?

This, in fact, was the central question for Indians at the end of the colonial era. What action is *dharmic*, justifiable, righteous? Is it my *dharma* to fight for the goddess' body, or to promote unity among her children, within her boundaries?  As Hinduism became increasingly identified with a Hindu nation, the question was intimately tied to the question of who was a "real" Hindu and "real" child of the Mother.  Different leaders had different solutions, clearly illustrated by two of India's greatest Hindu leaders. Gandhi, known as Mahatma ("great soul"), famously advocated the *dharmic* value of *ahimsa* (non-harming) as foundational to religious and national freedom.  His contemporary, Bal Gangadar Tilak, known as Lokamanya ("leader of the people") preached armed resistance in the name of self-defense.  Both considered themselves

Hindus, and both appealed to *itihasa* ("thus it was," mytho-history), particularly the *Bhagavad-Gita* section of the great epic *Mahabharata* - Gandhi to support a program of radical nonviolence, Tilak to support his conviction that violent resistance to British power was not only necessary, but justified by scripture. The difference between the two men can be encapsulated in their very different usages of the term *swaraj* ("self rule," or "home rule"). Tilak famously popularized the slogan "*Swaraj* is my birthright, and I shall have it!", with an unmistakably political meaning; for Gandhi, *swaraj* meant, first and foremost, individual self-control from the perspective of spiritual discipline.

Seen through the lens of questions about *dharma,* it is clear that these images, *qua* religious images, make different though complementary contributions to the ongoing "imagination" or "visualization" of Hindu identity, just as Gandhi and Tilak ultimately contributed to the "imagination" of a free India. We might view the "cow mother" images as Gandhian, the "warrior mother" ones as Tilakian. The "cow mother" images visualize a stable, benevolent world peopled by Hindu deities, in which members of all socioreligious communities are symbolically nourished by *dharma* according to their needs. In this universe, *dharma* is guarded by the righteous king who wards off evil and protects everyone. The "warrior mother" images visualize a world under active attack by alien forces; self-defense is the only option, although we can see in the goddess' face that she fights without hatred, as the *Bhagavad Gita* enjoins. The cow of *dharma*, her own physical extension, is under attack and she must protect it; it is too late to ward off evil, it is here, and the battle must be joined. Except for her lion, the mother in these images fights alone – she protects herself, as she reminded Vivekananda. However, the trope of family appears in militant literature such as Bankimchandra's novel *Anandamath*, which

calls for the mother's children to come to her aid, and in nationalist literature and imagery depicting the nation of India as a woman in captivity, who can only wait to be liberated.

Many, if not most, of the writers who have paid attention to Indian bazaar art in general (and to Bharat Mata in particular) have considered the genre in primarily sociopolitical terms. Art historian Kajri Jain, while acknowledging the devotional content of much "calendar art" and even the devotional use of specific images, prefers to consider mechanically reproduced images in socioeconomic terms. As scholars of religion, we must be suspicious of a worldview that sets up a false binary between the secular/sociopolitical and the religious. Does the fact that religious behavior has socioeconomic or political implications and dimensions render it somehow inauthentic as religious, or destroy its "aura", as Benjamin might have it?

For Westerners, and Western-educated people accustomed to drawing a distinction between sacred and secular, or religion and politics, it may be difficult to appreciate the seamlessness of a dharma-based perspective. The secular/political perspective may confuse religion's sociopolitical implications with "being political," that is to say, no longer sacred, as Walter Benjamin associated the proliferation of mass-produced images with "the political" and with the loss of sacred "aura." For Bal Tilak, by contrast, the dissemination of mass-produced images was a means of bringing religious consciousness and potency to the people. A Brahman by caste, Tilak published both English and vernacular newspapers, and he played a strong supportive and advisory role in the Chitrashala Press' design and distribution of the images of Hindu deities and heros. Where Benjamin seems to have felt a certain nostalgia for temple-based "original" iconography, Tilak worked to get sacred images out of Brahmanic control and into the

hands of common people, with the conviction that religious power was thereby strengthened rather than adulterated.

As we have mentioned, the role of the *dharma raja* was not only to protect the kingdom, but to guard the wellbeing of *dharma* within its borders. Before India became a republic in 1947, dissolving the last of the princely states, rulership was provided by members of the *ksatriya* caste – those whose *dharma* made them warriors and administrators. They worked intimately with *Brahmins*, hereditary scholars and priests, for a common goal; their functions were different but complementary, not opposing. Even today, according to Ashis Nandy, Indians tend to perceive politics ungrounded in *dharma* as "an amoral, clinical, ruthless pursuit." (Nandy 2002:27)

## A Goddess is Born: Santoshi Ma and Bharat Mata

As we turn to the figure of Bharat Mata, it is essential to recall that goddesses have come into prominence, even into being, throughout Hinduism's long history according to the needs of the time. Context-specific though their birth may be, it does not diminish their goddess status or religious resonance for their devotees. Sociologist Peter Berger has argued that "social and cultural truths are constructed through human processes of "world building", [which] also entails the construction of religion and religious categories." (Pintchman 2001:4) As Nandy puts it,

> New gods and goddesses are regularly born in South Asia. Despite their theoretical immortality, they also die frequently…not out of illness or accidents but out of forgetfulness or deliberate erasure. (Nandy 2002:153)

McDaniel's example of Adya Ma Shakti is an excellent example of a goddess who was "born" in a specific context in nineteenth-century Bengal. The devotee who neglected to

worship her picture, putting her at risk of "dying," suffered the consequences of that neglect until the picture was rescued and reinstated in a properly devotional setting.

Another well-known example of the "birth" of a modern goddess is Santoshi Ma ("mother of contentment"), who was "born" in the 1960s in North India to achieve national prominence through the 1975 Hindi screenplay based on her *vrat katha*.[100] The observance of the Santoshi Ma *vrat*, which involves a Friday fast strictly avoiding sour foods, apparently spread among lower middle-class women by word of mouth and through an inexpensive, mass-produced "how-to" pamphlet and poster of the goddess. The printed story is said to be sketchy, but the film elaborates it in the drama of a beleagured wife who finds contentment and family harmony through worshiping Santoshi Ma. The film was a spectacular success. In its wake temples to Santoshi Ma sprang up throughout India. Today this goddess is thoroughly homologized into the "major tradition" pantheon, with her devotees perceiving her film-incarnation as simply a contemporary manifestation of eternally-existing *shakti* . (Erndl 1993; Kurtz 1992)

Although both Santoshi Ma and Bharat Mata might appear to have been "born" from mass media, there are significant differences between them. Santoshi Ma has a fairly consistent backstory, homogenized if not created whole cloth by the film script, and she enjoys both temple worship and home-based ritual. Bharat Mata has never been the object of widespread religious ritual worship. From the perspective of art history and cultural theory, Bharat Mata was "born" from the pages of Bankimchandra's *Anandamath* and Tagore's 1905 portrait. There are only two major temples to her in India, despite the ubiquity of her images, and today her connection with the "major

tradition" goddesses Kali/Durga, Lakshmi and Sarasvati seems to be so vestigially represented iconographically as nearly to obscure her religious antecedents. The question arises: is Bharat Mata best understood as a "nationalist construction," or as a manifestation of Mahadevi ("great goddess") in her triple identity as Sarasvati, Laksmi, and Kali/Durga? To choose the first term of the binary is to make her into a purely political symbol, like the American Uncle Sam; however, to claim that she has no political persona would be disingenuous. Let us consider the implications of the Devi's triple nature.

## The Triune Goddess: Macro and Micro

The identification of Kali/Durga, Sarasvati and Lakshmi as aspects of one fundamental feminine principle and ground of being (*prakriti)* appears as early as the Devi-Bhagavata-Purana I.2.19-20[101], where the Goddess transforms herself into three forms (corresponding with the triune nature of *prakriti*, matter[102]) when she wishes to create. (Pintchman 1994: 180) Viewed as the embodiment of Prakriti, the goddess is understood to contain within herself the three *gunas* personified in her major manifestations as Mahalakshmi (*sattva*), Mahasarasvati (*rajas*) and Mahakali (*tamas*) (Erndl 1993: 31; Pintchman 1994: 180). On the highest level, *prakriti* is both an

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[100] A *vrat* is a ritual fast performed to a particular deity for the achievement of a particular goal; a *katha* is the folktale, which may be performed as a dance narrative, which recounts the story of the deity involved and provides background or rationale for the performance of the ritual.

[101] The *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is usually listed among the 18 "minor" or sectarian Purāṇas (encyclopedic compendiums whose topics range from cosmogony and cosmology to ritual instructions for worship of the gods). The date of its composition is unknown; scholars have dated it as early as the 6th century C.E. and as late as the 14th century. It was, in all probability, composed in Bengal, possibly over a period of time, by members of the local sect whose devotion centered on Devī.—Encylopedia Britannica

[102] *Prakriti* in Sakta theology is the "matter-energy that is the basis of all creation" (Erndl 1993:31), the ground from which all "stuff" is derived. It is composed of three essential elements or "strands" (*gunas*) :

impersonal principle and the Devi herself, who both transcends and encompasses all (other) female deities (Pintchman 1994:165). In the next sections we will trace Bharat Mata's genealogy in this triumverate of goddesses, and consider in greater detail the roots of her identity with India as *matribhumi*, "mother earth," sanctified by the body of the Devi in her manifestation as Sati, and with *prakriti*, matter – the material cause of Creation – itself (see Pintchman 1994:145). [103]

*Kali/Durga*

Kali and Durga, both fierce, warrior aspects of the Devi, are so closely identified in contemporary Hinduism that their names are often interchanged, or used conjointly, although they do have distinct mythologies. Kali Ma came to prominence in the nineteenth century in Bengal, where she was identified (along with Durga) as an important pan-territorial goddess. Unlike Santoshi Ma, Kali was not "born" at any readily identifiable historical moment; according to the *Devi-mahatmya*, she emerged from Durga's forehead during battle.[104] However, her visibility increased dramatically

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*sattva*, the principle of purity/clarity; *rajas*, the principle of activity; and *tamas*, the principle of lethargy. (See Pintchman 1994: 84-85)

[103] In Kalidos' view,

> Certain of the Devi's epithets…are personifications of abstract concepts. Laksmi symbolizes wealth, Dharmacarini 'righteousness' and Durga 'victory'. Bhudevi is a personification of the natural force, earth, and …soil…Devi above all is the creatrix that has been cast in art media in a way unparalleled in the history of world religions...Sakti is both macro and micro at the conceptual level…Through her various manifestations in art, Sakti represents the grand total of India's philosophies frozen into lithic tablets…Through her various iconic forms, Sakti thematises the mysteries of life and poses an eternal challenge… (Kalidos 2007: 150-151)

[104] Though most popular today in Bengal,she has been known in Hindu religious texts for more than fifteen hundred years and has been worshiped at one time or another throughout the Indian subcontinent. (Kinsley, in Hawley & Wulff, Devi, 1996:77)

and her worship rose as anxiety about colonial domination spread in Bengal, particularly following the 1905 partition. (Kumar 1993:46; McDermott 2001: 9-10)

Bengali culture has a strong tradition of powerful and independent female figures, some goddesses, some human, who demonstrate *shakti* through their ability to accomplish goals, often in the face of adversity. (Pintchman 2001:39) Economic pressures in the late eighteenth century, colonial dominance, and the colonially-imposed partition in 1905 all contributed to an urgent indigenous sense that something must be done, and that the goddess was a proven source of help in times of crisis. While Kali can hardly be said to have been "born" at this historical moment, certainly she achieved unprecedented prominence and acceptance across social groups during this period, and, homologized with Durga and Bharat Mata, she came to be perceived as the patron deity of Bengal. (McDermott 2001:10)

In 1809 a temple was built at the *pitha* known as Kalighat, where Sati's fingers were believed to have come to rest in Shiva's dance of grief. Kalighat had been a place of pilgrimage from at least the fifteenth century, but the temples which now arose at the site became important centers of worship and pilgrimage.

As we saw in chapter 2, nineteenth-century Kalighat was the epicenter for both "folk" painters and for an indigenous printing industry. Along with books and tracts, this industry produced a distinctive genre of boldly colored "Kalighat-style" artwork which was purchased by pilgrims who took home visual souvenirs. Particularly striking and characteristic are images of Kali in which the dark-skinned goddess faces the viewer head-on, with wide-open eyes, protruding red tongue, and hands which typically hold a sickle-shaped knife and a severed head. The example below, from the Kamala Art

Cottage, Calcutta, was probably produced 1900 - 1920s. Its traditionally “tribal” iconography of a black-faced, highly stylized Kali, incorporates elements of art-nouveau design such as geometric stripes and squares with its folk-art look of hand-made paper and vivid colors. The artist is identified, which would be highly unusual for true folk art, but the artists of Calcutta’s small innovative art studios took credit for their work, in Western style.




**Figure 26 Kali Ma, Kamala Art Cottage, Calcutta, 1900-1920**

Identified with, or homologized to, Durga, Kali Ma as the nemesis of colonial Britain achieved prominence first in Bengal, then more widely, from the turn of the

nineteenth century onward, as her mechanically-reproduced images carried her image beyond the borders of Bengal and Western India and the myth of the independent woman warrior who defends *dharma* resonated with the needs of the historical moment. [105] Kali has by no means "died" in the twenty-first century; as we saw in the example of her incarnation as Adya Ma Shakti, her image is even worshiped in cyberspace. As an aspect of Durga, her autumn festival is celebrated by Hindus and non-Hindus alike in Bengal and most other parts of India. For the colonial British, the "dark and bloody goddess" represented all that was terrifying about the prospect of an independent India,[106] and her image as a dark and threatening embodiment of the Other persists in such Hollywood films as *The Deceivers, Gunga Din,* and *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom.* In India, she is sometimes engaged as a feminist symbol.

**Sarasvati**

The Vedas associate Sarasvati with the now-invisible River Sarasvati, one of India's three major rivers. One of the few important Vedic goddesses to retain her significance in modern Hinduism, Sarasvati is the earliest example of a goddess who is associated with a river (Kinsley 1988:55) The Aryan practitioners of early Vedic religion were nomadic, requiring a portable religion which allowed for the improvisation of altars

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[105] [D]uring the early decades of the twentieth century…nationalists called for Bengalis to conveive of their motherland as agoddess. Although this goddess was rarely named Kali, Durga, or Uma – typically she was simply Ma (Mother) or Bharata Mata (Mother India) – she certainly took over their functions: like Kali, the Mother of the World, her help was sought in reducing prejudice between her children; like the ten-armed Durga, she was called upon to use her martial powers to rid India of foreigners; and, like Uma, she was importuned not to leave on Vijaya until she had cleansed Bengal of (white) demons…(McDermott 2001:9-10)

[106] "Kali-Ma symbolises the ultimate mystery in life…That Mai Kali will get the blood for which She asks unless quick action is taken…this is certain. Who governs India as a whole must govern by power." (Flora Annie Steel, *The Law of the* Threshold, 1924)

and “sacred space” wherever necessary. The reverence given to Sarasvati as the embodiment of a river with a particular location is important, because it shows that the Aryans had begun to identify their culture with a specific geographic region.

David Kinsley writes,

> The transition from nomadic to an agricultural, village culture is central to the transition from the religion of the Vedic Aryans to classical Hinduism. In classical Hinduism India herself is affirmed to be the center of the world, the navel of the earth, the special and sacred location of the divine. This is dramatically specified in the sacrality of many individual features of the Indian subcontinent…The goddess Sarasvati, then, represents a very early example of this tendency in the Hindu tradition toward affirming the land itself as holy. (Kinsley 1988:56)

As a river, Sarasvati is said to bestow riches, bounty, and fertility; to purify and heal; and to cleanse both sickness and sin. In all indigenous Indian religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism – spiritual metamorphosis is likened to fording a river.[107] Early Vedic references to the river Sarasvati identify her with the River of Heaven, whose origins are celestial but whose waters flow on earth; to enter or cross those waters means to “drown” one’s old self and be born again.

In later Hinduism Sarasvati becomes identified with speech and creativity; *puranic* literature describes her as a lovely young girl, dressed in yellow, adorned with jewels, carrying a book and a *vina* (lute). (Kinsley 58). By extension, she is the patron deity of education, reason, thought, and of the human ability to think and to create cultural products of all sorts. She is thus the chosen deity of artists, artisans, musicians, poets, and educators. Her iconographic attributes include a book, a *vina*, a rosary, and a water pot. The book associates her with the sciences and with learning, the *vina* with the

[107] As we have seen, *tirtha* means both a physical crossing place and a place of transition to a different state of consciousness, or to closer proximity with the divine.

arts, particularly music; the rosary and water pot associate her with spiritual practices and religious ritual. (Kinsley 60)  Along with Lakshmi, Sarasvati is often represented as a consort of Vishnu, the deity whose function it is to preserve and sustain the world.

**Lakshmi**

Lakshmi ("goal, prosperity, fortune"), also known as Sri ("radiance"), has been known in Hindu tradition since pre-Buddhist times.  She does not appear in the very earliest Vedic literature, but the term *sri* is common there.[108]  Perhaps the earliest hymn to Sri-Lakshmi appears in an appendix to the Rg-veda known as the *Sri-sukta*.  **(**Kinsley 1986:20)  Here she is requested to bring fame and prosperity, and to banish her sister Alakshmi ("misfortune,") who appears in such inauspicious forms as poverty, hunger, thirst, and want.

The hymn to Sri-Lakshmi identifies two objects which are associated with her throughout her history: the lotus and the elephant.  She sits on a lotus, is garlanded with lotuses, she appears like a lotus, is the color of a lotus; synonyms for lotus, "Padma" and "Kamala", are her epithets. Lotuses in Indian iconography symbolize spiritual authority and the ability to live in the world without attachment, as the lotus, rooted in mud, rises to the surface pure and uncontaminated.  At the same time, lotuses suggest fertility, creativity, things realizing potential and emerging from the dark.

Elephants, Lakshmi's second most enduring attribute, are associated with sovereignty.  The most common representations of Lakshmi show her seated on a lotus, flanked by elephants who shower her with water (and, sometimes, with gold) from their

[108] *Sri* suggests capability, power, advantageous skill, ruling power, majesty, beauty, luster, high rank, riches, prosperity, abundance. (Kinsley 1986:19-20)

trunks, as a king or deity is "bathed" in the ritual known as *abhishekha* – consecrated to service, and endowed with authority. Elephants are associated in Indian tradition with rain, as well as with intelligence, strength, and royalty; thus, Sri-Lakshmi, with her elephant attendants, is a cultural symbol of fertility, authority, royalty, and potency, as well as spiritual authority, material abundance, and the power to transcend limitations. In later Hinduism, she is often depicted as the consort of rulers, and – as Vishnu's consort – she is the epitome of the model Hindu wife, always incarnating with Vishnu as his helpmeet in upholding *dharma* age after age.

## Conclusion

As this brief consideration of Kali/Durga, Sarasvati and Lakshmi shows, the iconography and symbolism which accrued from them to the "new goddess" Bharat Mata have profoundly deep roots in Indian religion and art, many reaching back to the early Vedic period. It remains to explore in more depth ancient Hindu concepts of earth as sacred, and the resonance of those concepts in the modern figure of Bharat Mata.

# CHAPTER VI

# INDIA AS MOTHER'S BODY, INDIA AS CARTOGRAPHIC TERRITORY

## Introduction

This chapter first considers two competing narratives about the India as a physical body. The indigenous narrative conceives of the subcontinent as coterminous, if not identical, with the body of the mother goddess who is not only the earth, but matter itself. The colonial narrative conceives of India as colonized territory, cartographically delimited. These narratives found a sort of synthesis in the modern goddess Bharat Mata.

## Bharat Mata: Mother Earth and/or Cartographic Symbol

The image of Bharat Mata offers an important example of the synergy of "insider/outsider" positions on the subcontinent as terrain. Pre-colonial Hindus were accustomed to thinking of the subcontinent in religiomythical terms, as spiritual terrain - Bharatvarsha[109], the realm of the legendary emperior Bharat which is the only place on earth where humans can obtain salvation, or Bhudevi (Mother Earth). In this ethos, the area from the Himalayas to Ceylon was understood to be filled with pilgrimage sites sanctified by Sati's body; it was coextensive, if not identical, with the goddess' body.

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[109] The country which is situated to the south of Himalaya and where the descendants of Bharata reside is known by the name Bharat Varsha. It has been said in Vishnu Purana that the extent of this land is nine thousand yojonas and is the field of action, on account of which men go to heaven or obtain final emancipation. The seven principal mountain ranges in Bharata are Mahendra, Malaya, Sahya, Suktimat, Riksha, Vindhya and Paripatra. A belief goes which says that it is from the land of Bharat Varsha that an individual is able to attain emancipation in heaven. This is because no other arena is a field of action determining the last journey of an individual. (http://www.indianetzone.com/46/bharat_varsha htm)

Bhudevi, or Bhumidevi, is also known by the epithets Dhra, Dharti, Dhrithri, all of which refer to her sustaining beneficence as "that which holds everything" - cognate with *dharma.* (Kinsley 1988)

By contrast, the European colonial powers which occupied India saw the subcontinent as political territory – an extension of empire. One aspect of the colonial project involved the scientific mapping of that territory to produce mathematical cartographic schema of the land which England now claimed to possess. The colonial project was concerned, among other things, with defining and expanding its frontiers within the subcontinent, both through armed aggression and the bureaucratic annexation of princely states.

That the figure of Bharat Mata incorporates the cartographic outlines of India as "map" with the culturally resonant image of the mother goddess makes this goddess unique in the Hindu pantheon. Her image incorporates traditional attributes, such as trident, lion, garland, *abhaya* ("fear not") and *dana* (giving) *mudras*, book, rosary, and sword associated with Devi's manifestations as Kali/Durga, Sarasvati and Lakshmi. Bhudevi is associated with the earth, but only Bharat Mata is associated with India as map. I suggest that the combination of elements, even of worldviews, in her image exemplifies the concept of Bharat Mata as a "creole" icon, in which the meanings of "map" and "goddess" assume a new significance which is somewhat different from their original usages, just as in creole languages, cognates with the parent languages undergo semantic shifts. Viewing Bharat Mata as a "third term" goddess, a mediatrix between Euroscientific and Indian mythoreligious categories, offers a fresh perspective on the question whether she is a "real" goddess or a nationalist construct. This lens provides an

“insider” view into the imagined religious identity of modern Hinduism as something in which “religion” and “politics”, disparate categories in Western thinking, are mutually imbricated.

Historian Sumathi Ramaswamy, in *The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India (2010),* characterizes Bharat Mata as a

> new and unusual mother/goddess [with a] complicated entanglement in the Indian nation’s attempts to create for itself a visible and tangible form over the course of a century that began in the 1880s…Despite the garb of venerable antiquity in which Bharat Mata has been presented to her (Indian) beholders, she is a tangled product of charged encounters between the new and the old and of a fraught and conflicted modernity that is India’s late colonial and postcolonial experience of history. Mother India’s hesitant novelty and ambiguous modernity only becomes [sic] apparent, however, if we consider her diverse pictorial appearances, for much of the abundant poetry and prose utterances on the goddess contrarily clothe her in the archaic and root her in an immemorial past. (Ramaswamy 2010: 2)

Ramaswamy makes a case for Bharat Mata, not as a modern manifestation of Devi, but as a nationalist construction which appropriates religious imagery for political purposes. Much of her work focuses on Bharat Mata’s cartographic representations, which show her body either emerging from or coextensive with the subcontinent. Ramaswamy argues that Bharat Mata is less a modern manifestation of Devi than a nationalist response to the problem articulated by Tagore in the maxim: “No one can give up his life for a map.” In her view, Bharat Mata’s cartographic form is a nationalist construction meant to inspire patriotic sacrifice, and her traditional iconographic attributes are intended to deceive the masses into thinking of the nation, and of Bharat Mata as its embodiment, as more historically venerable than it, in fact, was.

Ramaswamy argues that Hindu reformers attempted to conceal the recent origins of their religious and national vision “by resorting to all manner of what Sudipta Kaviraj

adroitly characterizes as “subterfuges of antiquity” (Kaviraj 1993, 13; in Ramaswamy 2010: 55). Kaviraj’s phrase refers to the view that proponents of the emerging Hindu nation deliberately conflated existing cultural and historical categories to construct a questionably homogeneous national tradition, which was then represented as antecedent to the modern. This discourse, characteristic of such religious/nationalist leaders as Harischandra in nineteenth-century Banaras, linked terms such as “Arya”, “Hindu”, and “Vaishnava” with “Bharatvarsha” to support the idea of the nation as one entity characterized by an unbroken historical development (Dalmia 1997:340) [110] Those scholars who challenge this discourse do so on two grounds. First, the “history” it invokes is *itihasa*, mythohistory, rather than history in the Western academic, evidence-based sense; second, it seeks to legitimize a homogeneous view of pre-colonial India which, in the critics’ view, is unsupported, in fact unsupportable, by scientific evidence.[111] Ramaswamy maintains that

> [I]t is a pictorial analysis that is most revelatory of the extent to which her devotees cover Mother India in the garb of antiquity. So much so that it is commonplace for her followers -– and some scholars – to be taken in by the subterfuge and assume that she is one among the many time-honored goddesses of the region. Yet she is not one, and even the subterfuges of antiquity to which her pictures resort are unable to shake off the telltale traces of her novelty and modernity…(Ramaswamy 2010:55)

Such “subterfuges” include such artistic conventions for representing the divine form as “codes of frontality for direct engagement with the viewer”; the incorporation of the lotus as her “seat”; her crown, which Ramaswamy identifies as an attribute of Vishnu, but which is equally an attribute of Vishnu’s consorts; and the position of her right hand in

[110] “Bharatvarsha” means the land, or country, of the legendary emperor Bharat, whose realm, lying “north of the ocean and south of the snowy mountains” according to the Vishnu Puranam, encompassed an area at least coextensive with, if not larger than, the modern subcontinent.

*abhaya mudra*, the "fear not" gesture associated with protection and tranquility. (*Ibid.*, p. 56)

Ramaswamy is perfectly correct about the incorporation of divine iconography into representations of Bharat Mata. However, I question the position that those divine attributes are intended to hoodwink modern viewers into thinking that she is "one among the many time-honored goddesses of the region." I have not been able to identify any claims to this effect. In my view Bharat Mata is a modern goddess born of a popular response to a particular set of life-experiences. It is a theological tenet of many schools of both Shaktism and Vaishnavism that the supreme deity manifests in particular ways at particular times in response to particular needs; indeed, the Devi, as matter itself, is from one point of view never *out* of incarnation. Thus, from a religious viewpoint, there is no inherent problem with the idea that Bharat Mata may be simultaneously a modern literary and artistic creation and a manifestation of the Great Goddess, just as Santoshi Ma is widely accepted by her devotees as both the product of a film and a divine manifestation.[112]

I understand Bharat Mata as a pan-Indian Hindu deity, a modern manifestation of the Great Goddess, whose persona reflects existing traditions and iconography associated with the major goddess figures Durga/Kali, Lakshmi and Sarasvati as well as "folk"

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[111] D.N. Jha characterizes the sanatanist endeavor to construct an empowering narrative of identity as "indigenous propaganda", "a frenzied hunt for antiquity" which denies the reality of change. (Jha 2009: 10)

[112] What is somewhat problematic about Bharat Mata is that, unlike Santoshi Ma, despite her religious roots, her worship since Independence has developed along largely secular lines. Ubiquitous though her image has become, there is little evidence of Bharat Mata's having gained local cult followings. She has only two national temples, and despite her ubiquity in the mass media, she does not appear to have the same sort of devotional appeal as do Durga/Kali, Sarasvati and Lakshmi. Further study of local devotional practices might reveal interesting results about Bharat Mata's actual place in people's hearts. This raises the question: Does she, in fact, ultimately support Benjamin's argument for a loss of religious "aura" in an age of mechanical reproduction; and is mechanical reproduction responsible for that loss?

understandings of earth as goddess. My contention in this project is that her visual images, taken seriously as religious iconography, have something to say about the communal "imagination" of a modern Hindu identity. As we saw in the first chapter, Hinduism as *sanatana dharma* is fluid; elements recombine to form modes of worship, belief or practice which fit the needs of the time.[113] This viewpoint corresponds to ancient understandings of matter, *prakriti*, as feminine, and as composed of three constitutive *gunas* ("strands," or "energies") – somewhat analogous to protons, neutrons and electrons in Western science (Mishra, 1963). All matter is reducible to these three principles, which are identified as *sattva* (lightness, purity, clarity), *rajas* (energetic action), and *tamas* (darkness, destruction/ transformation), and with the colors white (*sattva*), red (*rajas*), and black (*tamas*).

When we recall that *prakriti* is feminine, it becomes clear why the goddess is so often represented in the great Shakta texts, the *Devi Mahatmya* and *Devi Bhagavata Purana*, in triple form, and how, in such a scheme, Sarasvati's white swan symbolizes *sattvoguna*, Lakshmi's red lotus and jewels represent *rajoguna*, and Durga/Kali, with her tiger and dark skin, represents *tamoguna*. Analagously, it becomes clear how the triple themes of mother as nurturer, as symbol of regency associated with a particular territory or land, and as warrior, apply in this religious worldview. Understanding the depth, psychological power, and nuances of these characterizations will provide insight into why the feminine divine principle held such popular resonance, and gained such visual primacy, in the "India-wide impetus to define one's community" (Freitag 1987:226) at the end of the colonial period.

[113]Throughout the history of Hinduism the leaders of thought and practice have been continually busy experimenting with new forms, developing new ideas to suit new conditions. (Radhakrishnan: 17-18)

Historian Tapan Raychaudhuri quotes an account by the Bengali litterateur and protonationalist, Bhudev[114] Mukhopadhyay (1827-1894) which reveals the importance of the Sati myth in Bhudev's encounter with colonial disavowal of India's sacred history:

> When I was a student of Hindu College [Calcutta], a European teacher told [us] that patriotism was unknown to the Hindus, for no Indian language had any word to express the idea. I believed his word and was deeply distressed by the thought. I knew then…the mythical account of Sati's death, but that knowledge did not help me refute the teacher's statement or console myself. *Now I know that…the entire motherland [matribhumi] with its fifty-two places of pilgrimage [shakti piths] is in truth the person of the Deity.* (cited in Raychaudhuri 1988)

Significantly, Bhudev tells us that he knew the story at the time of the encounter with the European teacher, but at the time, it did not help him to refute a discourse which was conducted in foreign terms. However, this deeprooted cultural symbol remained a part of his consciousness. Later on, when it became possible for Bhudev to take the religious symbol on its own terms, it served to transform his consciousness about the nature of India from political entity - colonized space - to sacred space, the goddess' body.

The above point is important in helping us to reclaim the religious resonance of Bharat Mata's "cartographic" image. Where Ramaswamy (2010), Jain (2007) and Pinney (2004) understand that image as a nationalist appropriation of religious symbols for political reasons, Bhudev's account reveals an interesting nuance. He knew the story of Sati and of the existence of the *pithas*, but for him they were religious images unrelated to the distinct and foreign concept of "patriotism" as a secular category. The experience of being shamed by the European teacher altered his consciousness. His consciousness was transformed, not by nationalist propaganda identifying the goddess

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[114] Bhudev's name, coincidentally, is an epithet of the goddess, from the root *bhu* ("earth").

with the map, but by the challenge of an "outsider" definition of Indian reality in terms which he felt, deeply, to be wrong.[115] The problem lay in the European proclivity for placing religious and political traditions in different categories, and the colonial failure to recognize indigenous categories. Just as missionaries thought Hinduism was not a real religion because it did not resemble Christianity, so Indians, with their mythological sense of history and space, were thought to have no concept of patriotism. When the European teacher set the terms of discourse as political, Bhudev did not know how to respond; but when, through his own internal process, he re-cast the terms of discourse as religious, he discovered a sense of conviction. Taken as a religious symbol, Bharat Mata *is* a modern manifestation of Bhudevi. The modern Hindi words translated as "patriotism" – *deshaprem, deshabhakti*, or *svadeshabhakti* – combine the concepts of *desh*, "country" (Sanskrit *desha*), with concepts of love (*prem*, *bhakti*), with *bhakti* having specifically religious connotations.

## A Goddess is Born II: Bharat Mata and her Genealogy

As far as her origins can be traced under the name Bharat Mata, this goddess was "born" as the title character of a dispossessed mother in a play by the Bengali playwright

[115] A result [of the dissemination of the Western category "religion"] has been that religious traditions that were once in practice and are still perhaps in ideal coterminous with human life in all its comprehensiveness, have actually found themselves supplemented more and more by considerations from other or newer sources, so that the religious seems to be one facet of a person's life alongside many others. (Wilfred Cantwell-Smith, cited in Sharma, "An Indic Contribution…" 6)

Kirin Chandra Bannerjee, first performed in 1873. In 1882 she appeared in Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's novel *Anandamath*, source of the freedom movement's hymn "Vande Mataram". In 1904/1905, she appeared under the name Banga Mata (Mother Bengal) in Abandrinath Tagore's painting of a four-armed, saffron clad Bengali woman holding "the four gifts of the Motherland to her children" in her four hands (Ramaswamy 2010: 15); this painting was quickly identified in nationalist circles as "Bharat Mata," a title it bears publicly to this day, although it is not clear that the artist so titled it.



**Figure 27 "Bharat Mata," A. Tagore, 1905**

In addition to the book, sheaf of rice, *mala* (prayer beads) and white cloth which she carries, this figure wears the saffron robes of a renunciate; her head is surrounded by a subtle halo. Despite the simple dress and the lack of jewelry associated with the mother goddess' iconography, the figure's four arms suggest that this is, indeed, a goddess rather

than a human woman; in fact, the painter has endowed her with the attributes of Sarasvati (book) and Durga (*mala*, bestowed on her by Brahma before battle)[116].

The one attribute not traditionally associated with any deity is the white cloth. Cloth was an important trope in nationalist imagery. India was the greatest exporter of textiles in the world; in the eighteenth century Indian cotton dominated the English market. When England developed its own textile industry in the nineteenth century, she imposed her exports on her Indian colony, devastating the Indian weaving and textile trades and wrecking the economy. The first mass protest of English cloth took place in Bengal in 1905, the year of Abandrinath's painting; in 1929 Gandhi was arrested for burning English cloth in Calcutta, and he famously made homespun cloth a staple of his independence movement. Thus, it is not surprising to find this image of "Mother India" holding a piece of cloth as one of her primary attributes.

The two images which follow will help us to "unpack" the religious iconography which contributed to Bharat Mata's persona as the embodiment of Sarasvati, Lakshmi and Durga/Kali. The first, titled Mahakali (Maha = great), is from the Ravi Varma Press, Bombay. Its style suggests the turn of the nineteenth century. The figure on the far right, identifiable by her *vina* (and by a Devanagari caption below her feet) as Sarasvati, holds a book and a *mala* (rosary). The figure on the far left is identifiable as Lakshmi by her lotuses, by the elaborate jewelry of a married woman, and by the *dana* ("giving") gesture of her lower left hand, with the palm turned towards the viewer and the fingers open. The central figure is unmistakably Mahakali. Her skin is dark, her upper hands hold a trident and an axe, while her lower hands hold a dripping sword and a freshly severed

[116] See Jayakar 1990:34 for this list of Durga's weapons from rural tradition: Siva-trident; Visnu – disc; Varuna – conch; Agni – a dart; Yama – iron rod; Vayu – bow; Surya – arrows; Kubera – mace; Indra –

head. She alone of the three figures is garlanded, as for worship; unusually, for her, the garland consists of flowers, not severed heads. Below her feet sits Ganesha, identified as her (and Shiva's) son by the trident which he holds; his lower right hand is raised in the *abhaya* ("fear not") gesture, often coupled with *dana* (giving) in Hindu iconography. The representation of Ganesha as Kali's son clearly homologizes her with the Great Goddess, and with her manifestation as Durga; if there were any doubt, her lion's head peeks from the top of the central throne. All three figures are crowned, and all three face the viewer directly. This is undoubtedly a *darshani* picture, meant for worship, planned so that the viewer both gazes at the object of devotion and receives the divine gaze. In it we see the goddess' three primary manifestations co-enshrined, with Kali/Durga given pride of place; this image shows her as both warrior and mother, flanked by symbols of wisdom and rulership.

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thunderbolt; Brahma – rosary and waterpot; Kala – sword; Viswakarma – axe; Himavan – lion.

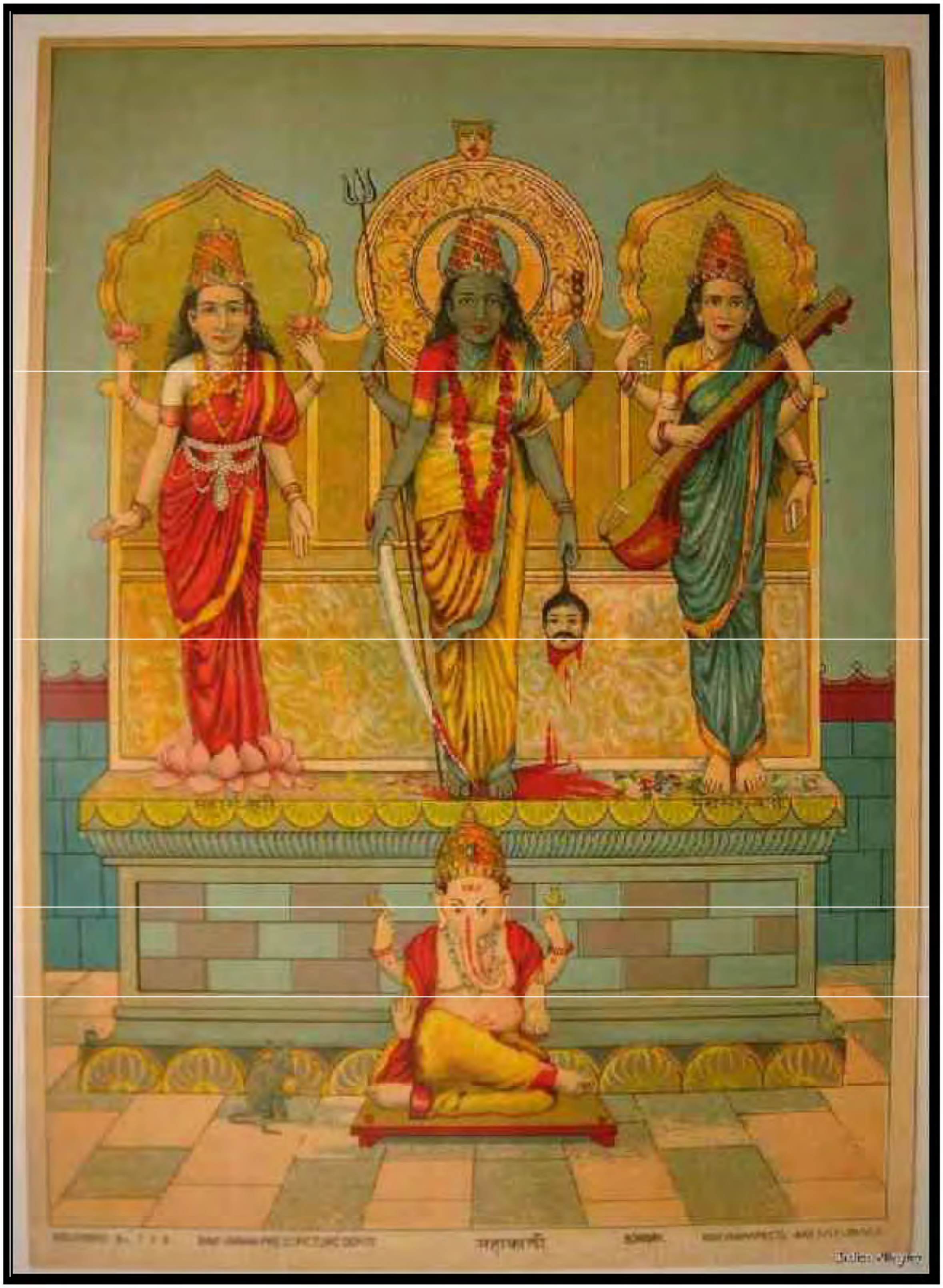


**Figure 28 Mahakali, Mahasarasvati, Mahalakshmi, lithograph, Ravi Varma Press**




**Figure 29 Bharat Mata, trilingual caption, ca 1920/1930s**

In the following image, Sarasvati and Lakshmi have receded into the background, and Durga/Kali is thoroughly homologized with Mother India. The background is lush with water, trees, flowers, and waterfalls.  Sarasvati sits in the doorway of her lakeside temple, flanked by her peacock, playing her *vina*, while her swan swims across the lake to draw the viewer's eye toward Lakshmi on her lotus.  Lakshmi's second elephant plays in a pool in the deep background.  Sarasvati has only two arms, while Lakshmi retains the usual four; the upper two hold objects which it is difficult to identify at this distance, but which are probably a rosary and a lotus flower; the two bottom hands are extended downward in gift-bestowing posture.

The primary figure, identified in Marathi, Bengali and English as Bharat Mata, stands in the foreground in a posture of waiting or resignation.  She has two arms.  Her right hand holds a trident, which bears the nationalist tricolor; her left elbow rests on Lakshmi's elephant, and her left hand supports her face in a classic gesture of yearning. Her eyes are upcast, perhaps to heaven, and her face is hard to read; is she disgusted? She is dressed as a married woman, with bracelets on both wrists and a *mangalsutra* (marriage necklace) around her neck; she is crowned like a queen, she wears gold jewelry, and her elephant is richly caparisoned.  Unlike the richly dressed and jeweled Mahishasuramardini in the German portrait seen in chapter 4, who maintained a martial stance astride her lion, Bharat Mata's posture here is relaxed, almost lax.  Durga's lion lies at her feet, the butt of the trident between its paws; it is the lion, not the woman, who meets the viewer's gaze directly.  Bharat Mata's gaze suggests: "How long must I wait?" or "Do I have to do this all by myself?"

Although the subjects of this picture, circa 1930- l940s, are undoubtedly religious and would have appealed to Indian people's unconscious and conscious minds in religious terms, it is not a *darshani* image; the central figure does not meet the viewer's eyes, but gazes upward. This is, perhaps, a teaching image, meant to inspire reflection and action. The central figure's message seems to be one of exhortation rather than an invitation to devoted contemplation. "Do something!" she seems to say, "We have the resources (Lakshmi), the education and art (Sarasvati)."

One final image deserves our attention, a lithograph from an unknown publisher. Here, Bharat Mata is a single figure with four arms. Her right hands hold, respectively, the nationalist flag on a standard topped with a trident[117]; and a mace (Vishnu's contribution to Durga's weapons in the *Devi Mahatmya*). Her upper left hand holds a lotus bud for Lakshmi, while the lower left holds a book, for Sarasvati. She is accompanied by a long-maned Africa lion resembling the one on England's crest. The lush and mountainous landscape, reminiscent of Bankim Chandra's poem "Vande Mataram", itself constitutes a reference to land and fruitfulness even without the aid of a cartographic representation. This figure encompasses the major attributes of India's three primary goddess manifestations, and effectively erases the distinction between the political and the religious. However, the goddess' gaze is not directed straight at the viewer; her gaze is, rather, contained within the frame, down and slightly to the left, as though she is waiting for or remembering something. The lion looks at her, somewhat expectantly. There is less sense of frustration in this image than in the previous one, but one still senses that all is not yet quite resolved or settled. Unlike the straight forward

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[117] A tricolor flag with a charka (wheel) in the center was adopted by the Indian National Congress in 1931.

gaze of Mahakali, which seizes the viewer's attention, this figure is somewhat abstracted.



**Figure 30 Nationalist Bharat Mata, 1930s**

While her artistic representations have varied over time, there is remarkable iconographic continuity from Bharat Mata to the goddesses of the *Devi Mahatmya,* where many of her important iconographic attributes are described. Raju Kalidos calls this text, a part of the *Markandeya Purana,* "a treasure-house of iconographical information relating to the Sakti goddesses"; among the important forms of the Sakti goddess referenced therein are Mahalaksmi, Mahasarasvati, Mahakali, and Durga (Kalidos, 2006:8 ). In the next sections, we will explore the themes of nurturer, earth, royal consort, and warrior as these contributed to the image of Bharat Mata.

## Mother as Nurturer

Bankimchandra Chatterjee's 1880's poem *Vande Mataram* hails Mother India as "richly watered, richly fruited…dark with crops…jeweled and adorned, the holder of wealth, the lady of plenty." (Aurobindo translation, in Ramaswamy 2010:119) This poem, soon to become a nationalist hymn, evokes the mother's bounty in terms of fruitfulness and wealth, both long associated with goddess Lakshmi. Like Bhudevi, the "earth goddess", and unlike Kali/Durga, Lakshmi is invariably represented as a "consort" goddess – like Bhudevi, she is often represented as Vishnu's wife. She is shown seated or standing on a lotus, crowned and decked with gold, sometimes bathed by elephants, which are themselves symbols of royalty. Paintings show Lakshmi against a variety of backgrounds, but they are always lush, green, and they always include water in the form of pools or rivers. Lakshmi's association with lushness and good fortune is taken up in the construction of Bharat Mata; and, like Lakshmi, Bharat Mata is understood to be the mother of all without ever being depicted in the company of a child.

Nurturing does not pertain only to physical wellbeing; the goddess Sarasvati nurtures through education. Her primary iconographic attributes include a vina (musical stringed instrument) and a book. Where Lakshmi is associated with elephants, and Durga with lions or tigers, Sarasvati's *vahana* (animal vehicle/companion) is a swan – a creature proverbial in Indian culture for its ability to traverse the "three worlds" comprised by water, earth, and air. *Hamsa*, "swan," is sometimes used to refer to a spiritually enlightened being, such as Sri Ramakrishna; in some yogic traditions, it is used as a mantra, with the creative etymological meaning of "I (*ham)* am that (*sa/so)*".

## The Goddess as Earth

The concept of physical matter (*prakriti*) as feminine is found in Samkhya philosophy from at least the fourth century CE (Lipner 158), but the idea of "mother earth" is far older. According to Sumati Ramaswamy, "The anthropomorphization of Earth as sentient female and as Prithvi is as old as Hinduism…" (Ramaswamy 2010:102) The Rg and Atharva Vedas refer to Prithvi Devi as "earth mother" (consort of Dyas Pitr, "sky father") and as nurturing and stable/solid (*dhr*, as in *dharma*). As Bhudevi, she appears in the Vishnu Purana as the consort of Vishnu, who famously, in boar form, rescues her from sinking beneath the ocean, overburdened with the sins of the world's population. Scholars such as Vidya Dehejia and David Kinsley see a relatively seamless transition from Bhudevi to Bharat Mata. Art historian Dehejia notes:

> Since the land itself is spoken of in Sanskrit as Prithvi or goddess earth, it is not perhaps surprising that kingdoms, cities, districts and boroughs are gendered feminine. India is Bharat Mata or Mother India. (Dehejia 1997:14-15)

Moreover, that land is almost invariably ruled by a king, who both benefits from it and protects it, like the *dharma raja* in our "cosmic cow" examples.

Historian of religion Kinsley suggests that "the fundamental conviction that the earth itself, or the Indian subcontinent itself, is a goddess, indeed, that she is one's mother, pervades the modern cult of Bharat Mata (Mother India" (1987:181) Scholars such as historian Ramaswamy (2010), whose study of Bharat Mata emphasizes her "cartographic" dimension as a nationalist deity, challenge the notion of a pre-colonial, pre-nationalist sense of India as a specifically delineated piece of territory. However, there is cultural evidence for a sense of the subcontinent as a geographic entity which is coextensive with the goddess' body, in the story of Sati (Shiva Purana, Kalika Purana).

In this story, Sati, Shiva's consort, immolates herself. The distraught Shiva picks up her burnt body and begins to dance with it in his arms, traversing the subcontinent. In the course of his dance, parts of her body fall to earth, creating *shakti piths*, or "power spots" of the goddess where the earth itself is imbued with her energy. Temples have been constructed at these "seats", which were pilgrimage sites long before their routes were mapped by modern cartography. Lists of these sacred locations appear in various *Puranas*, conveying a sense of the subcontinent as simultaneously physical space and sacred body – a sense which resonates with the visual image of the cosmic cow's body, containing rivers, mountains, and deities. In Diana Eck's words,

> Just as the cosmos is a biological whole [in Indian symbology], so on the microcosmic level the land of India is pictured as an organic whole, a full sacred geography. The living landscape is dense with significance. Each village has its *gramadevata*, the lord of its place. The sacred literature is full of *mahatmya*[118] of place: the Maimisa forest, the Ganga, Yamuna, and Godavari rivers, the Himalaya and Vindhya mountains. Such places have been affirmed to have particularly strong strands of connection to the macrocosm. They are called *tirthas*, a word that originally meant "ford" or "crossing place" and has come to mean a "spiritual ford," a place of pilgrimage…The great *tirtha* cycles include the seven cities (*saptapuri)*; the four divine abodes (*car dham*), one at each compass point; and the "seats" (*pithas)* of the goddess, each corresponding to a part of the goddess Sati. The whole of India adds up to a body-cosmos. (Eck, "Ganga"; in Hawley & Wulff, *Devi: Goddesses of India*, 1996: 142)

[118] Mahatmya = "glory," "majesty," a venerated narrative about a place, saint or deity; a hagiography of sorts



**Figure 31 Pilgrimage poster, Kamakhya temple, 1970s**

This modern pilgrimage poster of the Kamakhya temple (Assam) associates the goddess' body with this particular site, where her *yoni* (reproductive organ) is believed to have fallen. Also evident are Shiva's recumbent body, recalling images of *smashana* Kali dancing above his corpse, as well as Durga's lion, Lakshmi's lotus, and a multi-armed, multi-headed goddess figure. Devotees unable to visit such pilgrimage sites in person could engage in "virtual pilgrimage" through mechanically reproduced images. Such images facilitated their imagining themselves as part of the community of pilgrims, through the device of simultaneity, by allowing them to visit designated sites at the same

time that the actual pilgrimage party would be reaching them, and collapsing their physical location at home with the cosmic location of the *tirtha*.

## The Goddess and Sovereignty/Royal Consort

As Ramaswamy rightly points out, the depiction of a female body coextensive with the map of India is an innovation in goddess iconography unique to Bharat Mata. However, the association of female deities with rulership linked to territory did not begin with her. The image below, a late nineteenth- or early twentieth-century trade label, or "ticket", shows the Maharajah of Jaipur at Durga's feet, suggesting that he rules by her power and under her protection. The Devanagari inscriptions above and below the image read, respectively "Maharjah Jaipur" and "Calcutta". The Devanagari inscription on the left border mirrors the English inscription on the right, with the name of the advertiser (Ram Seal). In the lower left corner, below the Maharajah's legs, there appears the inscription "Durgi Ticket". The label has been placed in a pre-cut cardboard frame, probably by the owner.

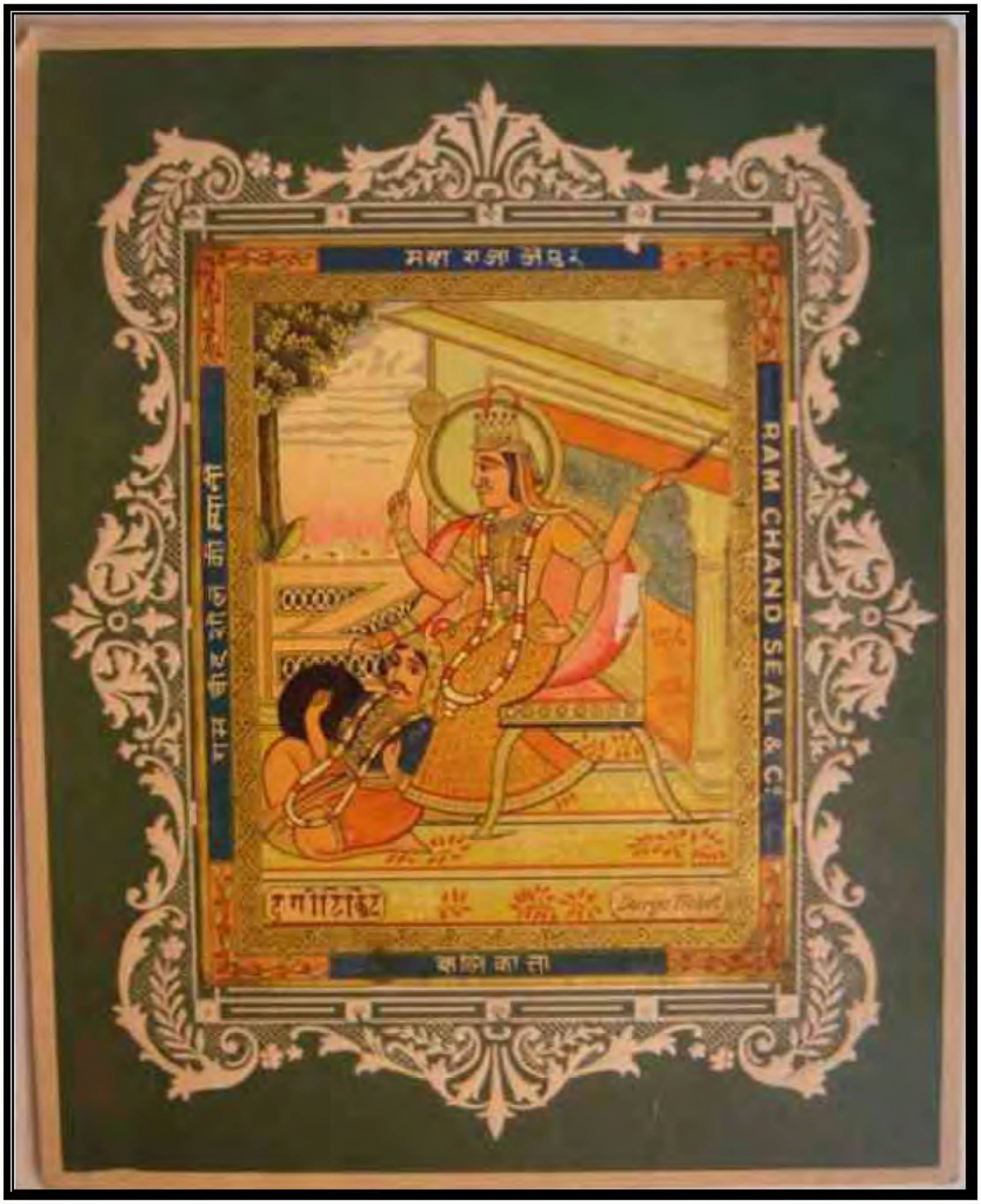



**Figure 32 "Durgi Ticket"/Trade label, Maharajah of Jaipur at Durga's feet**

Historian Tanika Sarkar suggests that

> Modern Hinduism…has systematically tried to absorb the public and political spheres within its fold…in fact this only continues its age-old practice of being

closely connected with political processes in pre-colonial times. (Sarkar 2001:271)

As we have seen, in Hindu culture the *dharma raja*'s religious obligations are thoroughly imbricated with his "political" ones: *dharma* is an all-encompassing concept. From ancient times, Indian kingdoms were ruled by warrior-kings with the close cooperation of religious specialists. Moreover, the basic linguistic/cosmological premise of *shakti* as feminine underlies the concept that male deities require a female consort to lend them power; similarly, the epic literature is replete with stories which explicitly tie a king's agency to rule to his association with a goddess.[119] *Itihasa* says that the eighteenth-century Mahratta ruler Shivaji, now popularly re-envisaged as a proto-freedom fighter, dedicated his fight and his territory to the goddess Bhavani. Lithographs show him receiving a sword from her hands, which allowed him successfully to defend his small Hindu territory against incursions by the Muslim forces of Emperor Aurangzeb. In this lithograph from the Ravi Varma Press, Lonavala (Maharashtra), circa 1910-1920, Bhavani's image recalls images of Lakshmi as well as Durga through her yellow-bordered red sari, her crown and jewelry, and her eight arms holding the usual bow, discus, trident, conch, and fire. Two of her hands support the very substantial sword[120] which she is about to offer to Shivaji, while her remaining free right hand extends towards him in a gesture somewhere between "fear not" and blessing. The king kneels at her feet in a reverent posture; it is clear that power and agency flow from her to him.

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[119] As we saw in Chapter 3, the proscribed Ashtabhuja Devi images were associated with "Vir" Sarvarkar's patriotic vow to regain India's sovereignty or die.

[120] Shivaji's sword, also called "Bhawani," has reportedly been in the private collection of the Queen of England since the British capture of Raigadh Fort in Maharashtra on June 7, 1818. As recently as August 2010, the Indian news agency Zee reported renewed efforts to have it returned to India. (http://www.zeenews.com/news647883.html; http://www.hindu.com/2004/01/23/stories/2004012300510900 htm)




**Figure 33 Shivaji receives Bhavani's sword, Ravi Varma Press, 1910-1920s**

In *Yogini Cult and Temples: A Tantric Tradition*, Vidya Dehejia presents evidence of a cult of *Matrikas*, “mothers,” dating at least to the third century CE, who, like Durga/Kali, are associated with fierce protection and with the power to defend the borders of a particular realm. These female deities, also called Yoginis, were worshiped in groups ranging from two hundred to seven. According to Dehejia, a lost *purana*, existing only in quotations in other texts, states that the Yoginis were worshiped in Bengal along with Devi on the final days of the annual Durga *puja*. Other *puranas* refer to them as “Durgas,” as companions of the Devi or even creations from her body. Tantric texts (7th to 9th centuries) associate their worship with royal patronage. The *Kularnava Tantra* states that the Yoginis, worshiped as a wife, will make a man famous, even a king, while the *Matottara Tantra* claims that “such worship will enable the king to achieve success in his military campaigns and to ward off invasions from neighboring kingdoms.” (Dehejia 1986) Their earliest known stone temples, dating from the ninth century, were presumably constructed under royal patronage. Dehejia writes:

> `The centuries between 850-1200, the period of the Yogini temples, witnesses a plurality of political power, with a continuous struggle for supremacy between a number of independent kingdoms. In an atmosphere of political flux…one can visualize the royal devotee assigning importance to the cult of the Yoginis who promised him success in military campaigns. (Dehejia 1986, 90)

It should be recalled that India consisted, until 1947, of independent kingdoms of various size. Those with Hindu rulers often had patron goddesses who were identified with the land, and who were regarded as conferring the authority to rule, as in the case of Shivaji and Bhavani. Colonial history involved the progressive annexation of individual kingdoms by the British empire, and the dissolution or re-drawing of their boundaries.

The removal of Shivaji's sword to England symbolically transferred the goddess-conferred power to rule from Indian to British soil.

The association of the yoginis with motherhood (nurturing), military success, and with Durga, points to an ancient identification of the protective mother with battle. This genealogy problematizes arguments such as Ramaswamy's that Bharat Mata's warrior aspect is a modern nationalist construction, or "subterfuge of antiquity" in aid of political goals. However, the yoginis' historical association with royalty and military conquest problematizes the modernity and the political, as distinct from religious, nature of that concept.

## The Goddess as Warrior

The type of the fierce, sword-wielding goddess, no one's consort, is most widely embodied in popular imagination by Durga and her alter ego Kali. Kali as the image of all that is wild, uncivilized and threatening captured the colonial imagination, as we saw in the image of the "dark and bloody goddess". It persists today in popular fiction and film (*The Deceivers, Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom, Gunga Din*, to name three) as the face of India's "dark side." In the nineteenth century, the annual Durga puja became the most popular social and religious festival as Kali, once associated with marginal groups, gained prominence as a goddess. (Kumar 1993:45).

Kali's prominence as Bengal's national goddess was coextensive with the rise of colonialism, and with a crisis of power in which the old elite were forced to redefine themselves. (*Ibid.*) Ashis Nandy explains:

> [W]hile studying the nineteenth-century epidemic of *sati* in Bengal, I found out that the popular public worship of Kali…became an important socio-religious

> festival in Eastern India only towards the end of the eighteenth century. Previously Kali – the fierce, violent, dark goddess of popular imagination – had been primarily the goddess of marginal groups such as robbers and thieves, and some incarnations of her were associated with dangerous diseases. These gave her an ambivalent status. Now, along with Durga, she emerged as one of Bengal's two presiding deities from the great traditional mother goddess of the region, Chandi. After the great famine of 1772 killed [approximately one-third of the population] and the colonial political economy caused massive cultural dislocations, Kali continued as the goddess of marginal groups, becoming for instance the presiding goddess of the Thugs ravaging the countryside and pilgrimage routes. But she also…became the chosen deity of the anomic, culturally uprooted, urban, upwardly mobile, upper castes in greater Calcutta and areas heavily influenced by the British presence, where a new political economy and urban culture were encuring the collapse of traditional social norms. Durga became a more benevolent incarnation of Chandi and gradually emerged as the most important deity in Bengal. This changing cartography of …goddesses, who can be benevolent but are also associated with the extra-social, the amoral and the criminal, gives an altogether different set of insights into cultural changes. It profiles the anxieties, fears and hopes of a society that neither a desiccated, formal study of theology and high culture yield, nor any ethnography of the better-known deities. (Nandy 2002:145-146)

In most images, Bharat Mata retains the iconographic symbols of sword, trident, and lion associated with Kali/ Durga. This should not surprise us; the "anomic, culturally uprooted, urban, upwardly mobile castes" in Calcutta were the pool from which most of Hinduism's earliest reformers came. These were the very people who were engaged in imagining the "third level" of modern Hindu religious identity, one which mediated amongst traditional social and religious categories, and a *dharma* responsive to modern challenges. In worshiping Kali/Durga, "emphasis was being laid on energy, nature and action: *prakriti* and the martial aspects of *shakti*, which can be protective, as in Durga, and …destructive, as in Kali." (Kumar 1993)

The lion, by a happy accident or some trick of the collective unconscious, had symbolized royal power in both Indian and British culture for centuries. In the nineteenth century, images of England, personified as Britannia, became popular on European coins

and in the print media, even as Kali/Durga's image gained prominence in India. Britannia, too, was depicted as a woman warrior holding a trident and accompanied by a lion, as in the trade label below.



**Figure 34 Trade label, Britannia with trident and lion**

Britannia's trident, to a European, evokes Poseidon, ruler of the seas, rather than Shiva; the ships in the background reference England's identity as a world seapower. Her lion has the long mane of the African lion usually associated with the "English" lion. Until the late nineteenth century, and even in some twentieth-century images, Durga's mount is frequently a tiger or the short-maned Asiatic lion, as in this nineteenth-century gouache.



**Figure 35 Durga on short-maned lion, gouache, 19th century**

However, as we saw in the earlier lithographs of Durga defeating the buffalo demon, on the battlefield Durga's lion typically has a long mane; and images of Bharat Mata which show her with a lion almost invariably show the long-maned variety. Further research might shed more light on the appropriation by Durga/Bharat Mata of Britannia's lions.

Interestingly, both Queen Victoria and Durga were perceived by the Indian public as independent women who were mothers. Victoria, as a widow, should have been perceived by Hindus as inauspicious, but her status as a mother – and, perhaps, her outsider status - evidently trumped her widowed status. A woman without a husband is in an anomalous position in traditional Indian society, where a woman's status is defined in relation to her husband, father or brother. Reigning queens have historically attained that status through the deaths of their husbands, by becoming regents for their minor sons. Local tradition in Bengal depicts Durga as daughter, mother, and wife as well as demon-slayer. This Bengali image is a departure from the "great traditional" one, in which Durga/Kali is a warrior, but no one's consort or mother, and from the norm for goddesses to give power (*shakti*) to their consorts: Durga is understood to receive power from Shiva when she appears as his consort, not to give it. Her warrior/maternal status both lends her support in battle and allows her devotees to identify with her by aligning her experience with theirs. Tithi Bhattacharya refers to an "image of the goddess as she vanquishes… Mahisasur while her two sons, Kartikeya and Ganesam and her two daughters, Lakshmi and Sarasvati, stand by supportively." (Bhattacharya, 926)

The annual autumn festival which commemorates this victory is celebrated in Bengal as a bride's brief visit to her mother before departing for her husband's house. Songs emphasize the goddess' kinship with human women, whose emotions and experiences find expression and validation in the festival's rituals. Nineteenth-century Calcutta celebrated Durga *puja* on a lavish scale which included all the city's inhabitants as "family," and blurred the boundaries between private and public. Home *pujas* were augmented by public processions in which goddess images were carried through the streets, with entire neighborhoods, regardless of caste or religious affiliation, participating across social lines and competing for the most lavish and beautiful displays of devotional art. At the same time, wealthy Hindu families opened their mansions to the public, welcoming Christians, Europeans and Muslims to their home *pujas*. When foreign interests overwhelmed Calcutta's economy late in the century, the festival's inclusive character began to erode. "Hindu" identity emerged as a marker of distinction from the foreigners, and many of Calcutta's Hindu citizens seized this opportunity to assert themselves publicly against Christians and Muslims in an increasingly contested economy.

In the 1930s and 1940s, a genre of religio/nationalist political art appeared in the vernacular presses and in the form of cheap pamphlets or posters, by such artists as Prabhu Dayal. The epicenter of such publishing was the nationalist presses in Cawnpore (modern Kanpur), a city famous both for a horrendous massacre of British civilians in 1857 and for its strong Socialist movement in the 1930s. Cawnpore was an emotionally charged space for the British, the name evoking one of the most contested episodes of the 1857 uprising (or mutiny, depending on one's point of view.) Faced with a military in

open revolt, Cawnpore's ruler, the Nana Saheb, had offered the European population safe conduct out of the district by river. Once launched, marksmen fired on the boats, killing most of the passengers; those who emerged from the river were cut down on the shore. Retribution by the British troops, when they arrived at the scene of the "massacre", was famously brutal. The Nana's role in these events was never clearly ascertained, but Cawnpore, for the British, became synonymous with treachery and horror. Such associations gave Cawnpore's nationalist publishers tremendous leverage in fomenting unease by producing distinctively "modern" looking allegorical political images, their black and white color scheme and topical thems suggesting the influence and topicality of newsreels, and lending sinister associations even to figures such as Gandhi and Bharat Mata.




**Figure 36 The siege of Lanka/Lankashire, 1930s**

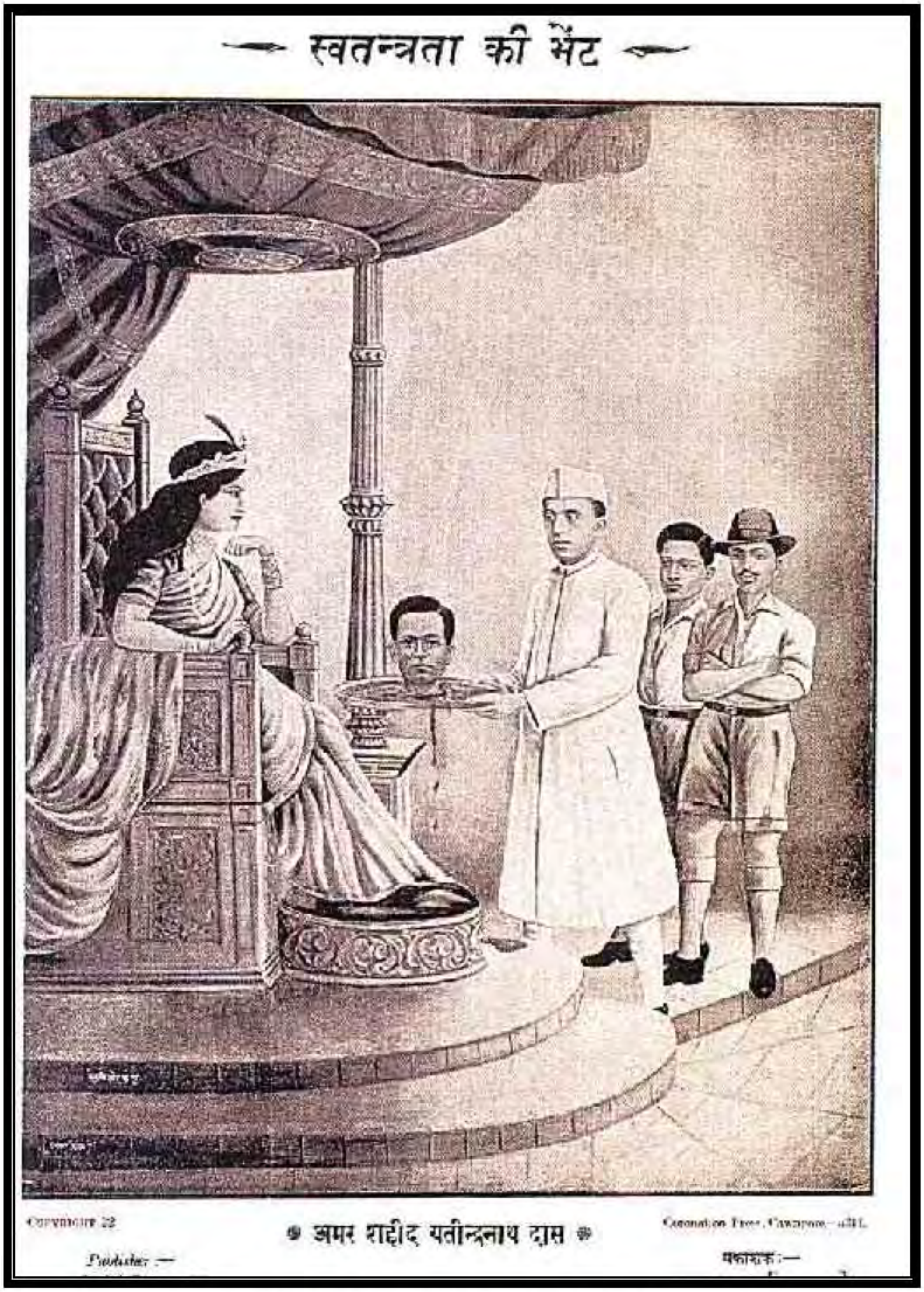



**Figure 37 Svantantra ki Bharat, 1930s**




**Figure 38 Gandhi in Bharat Mata's lap, Kanpur, 1930s**

These unapologetically nationalist images purposely conflated nationalist figures with heros of mythology to make a political point. Dayal used the image of Mother India to good allegorical effect. Figure 36 depicts her as the captive Sita being rescued by Gandhi and the Congress party. The title of Figure 36, “The Siege of Lancashire,” carries several levels of reference. It refers to the nationalist boycott of English cloth produced in Lancashire while making a pun on “Lanka,” the name of the kingdom where Sita was held captive in the *Ramayana*. Its point is thus multi-pronged. It suggests to the viewer that Mother India is held economic captive by British colonialism, and that Gandhi’s Congress members will free her. It invites the viewer to equate the British with the demons who captured Sita, and it suggests boycotting English cloth in favor of homespun as a step towards “freeing Sita”. Sita, here, may be understood as Mother India in distress, to be rescued by the nationalist movement, which in this picture consists entirely of men.

In Figure 37, “Svatantra ki Bharat”, Bharat Mata appears as a queen receiving the head of a martyr from Pandit Nehru, flanked by two other freedom fighters (Bhagat Singh, identifiable by his “trilby” hat, and, perhaps, Chandrasekhar Azad). “Svantantra” is an almost-untranslatable word meaning something like “fully independent”; it is used in a philosophical or theological sense to designate the supreme deity’s absolute freedom from conditioning of any sort. (See http://vedabase.net/s/svatantra ) “Bharat”, of course, names the mythological ancestor of all the inhabitants of the land which bears his name (“Bharatvarsha”, “land of Bharat”). This image thus implies that India’s full sovereignty as sacred space is a gift to the mother goddess (the embodiment of that space) from her martyred sons. Viewed as counterpoint to Figure 4 (“Delhi Durbar”), which depicts a

feminine India bowing to an enthroned English king, this image dramatically highlights the tensions between narrative and counternarrative as the narrative “voice”shifts from colonial to indigenous.

In Fig. 38, Bharat Mata’s form emerges from and nearly encompasses the subcontinent; she appears as a mother holding Gandhi on her lap, while he holds a spinning wheel, symbol of independence. In place of the usual trident, she holds a tricolor flag whose central device is obscured. Unusually, in this picture her gaze nearly meets the viewer’s, although it is still slightly up and to the right, perhaps looking toward a future which is very close to the present. Gandhi, however, looks to the left, out of the frame, as if considering the events which have brought him to this moment.

A far more militant contemporary image (below) evokes Mahishasuramardini. The lower caption identifies the subject as Maharani Lakshmi Bai; the one above her head reads “The heroine of Jhansi”. The Rani of Jhansi, regent for her underage son, died on the battlefield in the uprising of 1857, defending her state and her son from British annexation and passing into nationalist legend. This 1940’s-era print published in Cawnpore shows her on horseback, her infant son strapped to her back. She holds a sword and an Indian nationalist flag which ends in a trident. She is spearing a recumbent figure in modern European dress, apparently a British officer. To that figure’s right there appears a ghostly figure, evidently the spirit of the dying European, which evokes the anthropomorphic demon emerging from the buffalo’s corpse in Mahishasuramardini images. The Rani is identified with the goddess through the conventions of the trident, the act of spearing, and the figure apparently rising from the fallen foe, here identified as European but also inescapably associated with the demon.




**Figure 39 The Heroine of Jhansi, Maharani Lakshmi Bai**

The theme of the *virangana*, "virile" or "heroic" woman, achieved some popular prominence in the struggle for independence, with images of historically independent women of executive ability such as Lakshmibai (d. 1858) of Jhansi, Raza Sultani (d. 1240) of Ahmednagar, Ahilyabai Holkar (d. 1795) of Ahmednagar, and others, published on posters, labels, and similar ephemera. Portraits of prominent nationalist women appeared on postcards and, frequently, cloth labels.

The lithograph below, from the Calcutta Art Studio, features Sarojini Naidu as Padmini of Chittor, the Rajput queen who famously committed self-immolation in 1303 rather than surrender when her husband fell in battle. To a contemporary, the image would recall Mrs. Naidu's prominent role in leading the pivotal protest at the Dharasana

Salt Works when both Gandhi and his deputy Abbas Tyabji were arrested. Most unusually for a woman in this time and place, Mrs. Naidu stepped in, leading scores of demonstrators into the clubs of British troops until she was arrested herself. The artist invites the viewer to compare Queen Padmini's heroic sacrifice with this highly emotionally charged and highly politically effective contemporary event by showing the female figure ahead of the male troops, evidently spurring them on in spite of the certain destruction which lies ahead.



**Figure 40 Sarojini Naidu as Padmini**

Figure 41 shows a sorrowing Dukhi Mata, "suffering mother," her wrists manacled, weeping as her nationalist sons burn to death in the candle flame of sacrifice for her freedom. The large figure on the left, Krishna, identifies her as his mother

Yashoda. The ruined pillar suggests India's lost glory, and the presence of Krishna, surrounded by nationalist martyr "moths", the need for Bharat Mata's "sons" to protect her.




**Figure 41 Dukhi Mata, India grieving the deaths of her martyr sons**

Figure 42, titled "Mahatma Gandhi at war," probably from the 1940s, shows Gandhi in the role of Krishna as the charioteer of the *Bhagavad Gita.* A figure in a Congress cap, perhaps Nehru, acts as standard-bearer, holding a flag with a spinning wheel device. Behind him in the chariot (labelled "Congress" in Devanagari characters)

are Congress members and freedom fighters, including Gandhi's wife Kasturba and Sarojini Naidu. Here, the women are important but supporting characters in relation to Bharat Mata's "son" Krishna. The visual references to the Bhagavad Gita and the Mahabharata war homologize the current political struggle with the mythological epic, in which the rightful heirs to the kingdom fought to regain the throne from those who had usurped it by subterfuge.




**Figure 42 Mahatma Gandhi at war**

In Figure 43, Bharat Mata is the primary figure, with her "sons" appearing as faces on her garland. This remarkable example of religionationalist "photo bhakti" is the photograph of another image, possibly a poster; it has been stuck on a homemade frame. The caption "Bharat Mata" in the lower left corner is partly cut off by the homemade framing job. The artist and date are unknown, but it appears to be from the 1940s. In it, the figures of Kali and Bharat Mata are homologized. The central figure emerges from and effectively replaces the cartographic form of India; at her lower left, where Sri Lanka would be, the figure of Annie Besant sits in a devotional pose. This Bharat Mata is crowned, jeweled, garlanded, and armed. Her upper left hand bears Sarasvati's book; the upper right brandishes a sword. The lower left is raised in an open-palmed gesture and turned toward Annie Besant, not the viewer; it recalls the position of Bhavani's hand toward Shivaji, partly "fear not," partly reassurance or blessing. The lower right hand holds Durga's trident. The garland around Bharat Mata's neck consists, like Kali's, of heads: but these are, recognizably, the heads of nationalist leaders and martyrs. Like many Bharat Mata images, the figure's eyes gaze out of the frame; they do not meet the viewer's gaze but look toward some unknown future.



**Figure 43 Bharat Mata as Kali, with Annie Besant**

In this image, Durga/Kali, Sarasvati and Lakshmi – the embodiments of ferocity, erudition and rulership – are completely incorporated into the body of Bharat Mata, who appears as the primordial cosmic female *shakti* of the *Devi Mahatmya.* However, she is

grounded in the modern historical moment by the presence of Annie Besant[121] and the faces of well-known freedom fighters. I have tentatively identified them as:

| | |
|---|---|
| Top left – Ashfaquallia Khan | Top right – Gopal Krishna Gokhale |
| Mohandas Gandhi | Dadabhoi Naoroji |
| Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya | Mukhtar Ansari? |
| Surendranath Banerjea | ? |
| Badal Gupta? | Rabindranath Tagore |

Center – Bal Gangadhar Tilak; bottom – Vinoba Bhave?

Annie Besant, Irish by birth, theosophist and self-styled Hindu, was the first woman president of the Indian National Congress (1917). Her presence, coupled with the identities of the "heads" in Bharat Mata's garland, suggests that this image was produced by an artist associated with the INC. It is an indisputably "Hindu" image, its devotional character underlined by Mrs. Besant's posture: seated in half lotus, her hands are folded in *anjali* or "prayer" mudra. This representation of Bharat Mata clearly represents the subcontinent of India as sacred ground. Like the "cosmic cow" images from the previous century, it presents an inclusive vision of India: the freedom fighters represented as having sacrificed their "heads" (lives, identities, egos) to her include Muslims and at least one Parsi (Dadabhoi Naoroji). The *sanatana dharma* which this image reflects is not the kind of modern Hinduism which identifies itself in contradistinction to Islam, but a universalist strand, of the sort associated with Gandhi and the early INC.

This image is my personal property, bought from an online auction; I have not seen another example of it, and do not know whether an "original" exists. It appears to

[121] According to the Indian National Congress website, "Dr. Besant was a combination of Parvati, Lakshmi and Sarasvati".

be a photograph of a painting, and it is impossible to know whether it was reproduced by someone for personal use, or whether – as I suspect, based on the example of Adya Ma Shakti's "photobhakti" – what I have is one example out of many.

I would argue that despite its political elements it is a mechanically reproduced *religious* image, and that it should be taken seriously as an example of visual theology. By "visual theology" I mean that the interaction between the viewer's consciousness and the image is psychologically mediated in a religious mode: it directs the viewer's attention to something which encompasses and transcends immediate, corporeal, historical experience, and it provides a link between that dimension and this. This image asks us to recognize Bharat Mata as a modern apotheosis of Kali, Durga, Sarasvati, Lakshmi – to take her seriously as an object of worship. The cartographic element which Ramaswamy considers to be Bharat Mata's essential iconographic attribute, and the defining difference between her and all other goddesses, is faintly suggested; however, the outlines of the subcontinent as map are so blurred by light that the figure no longer seems coextensive with it, but larger. As I read it, this Bharat Mata image embodies a vision which transcends national and sectarian boundaries, not in an imperial spirit, but in the inclusive spirit of *sanatana dharma* as an eternal truth which is flexible enough and comprehensive enough to apply to all people, everywhere, at all times. This is the vision expressed by Gandhi, when he wrote:

> My Hinduism is not sectarian. It includes all that I know to be best in Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Zoroastrianism. I approach politics, as everything else, in a religious spirit… It is because I am a *sanatani* (orthodox) Hindu that I claim to be a Christian, a Buddhist and a Muslim… I claim that Hinduism is all inclusive and I am sure that if I live up to my convictions, I shall have served not only Hinduism but Islam also. (Radhakrishnan 2000: 469)

By taking images of Bharat Mata on their own terms, as religious images, we

have gained a glimpse into the "imagination" of a modern Hindu religious identity in the moment of time preceding Indian independence. These images provide a visual hermeneutic on the concerns and goals of the Hindu community as "mother." They reveal several values as primary: a religio-cultural view of Hinduism as *dharma*, or right relationship and right behavior between the invidual and the larger entities which encompass him (family, clan, social group, cosmos); Hindu identity as broadly inclusive, on a "family" model which includes Muslims, Parsis, and Christians; a view of India as sacred space; and a gendered representation of *dharma* in terms of the female body. These images affirm the centrality of the visual in Hindu devotional practice, while evincing deep roots for the potent cultural symbols to which they refer. They act to homologize local or modern "lesser" goddess traditions with "greater" or Sanskritic traditions, without attempting to homogenize or standardize visual representation of the goddess. Lithographs combine Western technology and visual theory with indigenous artistic content to produce an artistic "third term", which is neither European fine art nor unmediated Indian folk art but something combining elements of both. Finally, they are evidence of the cultural project to conceive of a coherent "Hindu" identity which could accommodate the various strands of India's Vedic-derived religious traditions, and how that was accomplished through the image of a goddess figure which combined attributes of maternality, fertility and nurturing with attributes of wisdom, power, sovereignty, and military efficiency.

There is one problem with taking Bharat Mata's images as religious: they have not inspired any significant *bhakti* practices or cults. As we have emphasized throughout this project, *darshan* – the transformational experience of seeing and being seen by a

deity – is central to most Hindu practice. Image worship, though not universal, is highly salient in Hinduism. One of the important ways in which mechanically reproduced images contributed to the "imagination" of a Hindu religious community, in Anderson's sense of "imagination" and of "community", was through their portability and their simultaneous availability to people regardless of caste, gender, literacy, or religious education. Bazaar images could be, and are, worshiped by devotees when and where they choose, "democratizing" worship and removing it from the exclusive control of a small group of religious specialists (Brahmans) at the top of a socioreligious hierarchy. However, temple worship, whose rituals involve a fixed image of the deity and the participation of religious specialists, remains extremely widespread as well – except in the case of Bharat Mata, who, as we have seen, has only two temples, one an overtly nationalist shrine.

## Bharat Mata: A Hindutva Goddess?

In her article on the Haridwar temple, Lisa McKean (1996) records the passage of a resolution at the 1988 VHP Ascetics' Convention, to the effect that if Indians regard Rama and Krishna as "national heroes" and touch India's sacred ground three times with their heads while saying "Bharat Mata ki jai," they may belong to "any religion." (Hawley, 260) In a similar vein, the Haridwar temple, while paying lipservice to the notion that Indians may belong to any religion, requires the physical performance by visitors of characteristically Hindu devotional movements such as bowing, garlanding, and accepting interventions by the priests – effectively demanding sectarian obeisance which renders Bharat Mata a sectarian Hindu "mother" rather than a universal one.

The problems of “nationalist” and chauvinistic Hinduism are many and real. It would be remiss to ignore Bharat Mata’s association with current communal conflicts and violence, but that association is not the thrust of my argument. Rather, I have sought to reclaim Bharat Mata’s religious genealogy and distinguish it from modern political appropriations of her image. By taking a phenomenological approach to the image of the divine feminine in poster art, we have discovered a deep structure in modern Hinduism which conceives of religious community in feminine images, both maternal and powerful, and which rests on an innovative and inclusive worship tradition.

## Conclusion

In closing, however, on the subject of worship, it remains only to say that , unlike Kali, Durga, Lakshmi, Saravati, and even Santoshi Ma, there is little evidence of spontaneous private worship of Bharat Mata in home shrines. The image of Bharat Mata now seems to be receding into corporate worship at nationally sanctioned sites, leaving the creative innovations of “photo bhakti” to other deities.

# CONCLUSION

In this project, I have attempted to shift the sociopolitical emphasis of academic discourse on mechanically reproduced "god pictures" by taking the images on their own terms as *religious* images. By "religious" I mean a perspective which conceives of the world on two mutually imbricated levels, one physical and political, the other metaphysical and transcendent; and the process by which people who hold such a perspective endeavor to discover meaning in terms of the connections between those two dimensions. I have inquired into the role of these pictures in the construction of a pan-Indian vision of Hinduism at the end of the colonial era, focusing on a selection of images depicting the divine as nurturing mother and woman warrior, and culminating in the image of Bharat Mata. This inquiry has revealed the importance to modern Hindu religious identity formation of the mother as a symbol for religious inclusivity, and of Shaktism, Hinduism's "full-blown feminine theology", which

> completely and unequivocally identifies the ultimate reality with the Goddess…as supreme in her own right and not on account of association with any God. Her…independent status is most clearly spelled out in the *Devimahatmya*…[in which the account of] her conquest of the buffalo demon…represents the triumph of the female principle over all negative forces. (Sharma 2000:68)

I do not suggest that modern Hinduism can or should be identified as exclusively or primarily Shakta-oriented; however, the symbol of a powerful and independent maternal/female principle served the imagination of colonized Indians well in constructing a narrative of community and agency for all the inhabitants ("sons") of a beleaguered Mother India.

I have undertaken a phenomenological investigation of a selection of late nineteenth and early twentieth century lithographs related to this narrative with the question in mind: What do these pictures tell us about the formation of a modern Hindu religious identity? How can they help us to understand the process by which modern Hinduism was "imagined", in Benedict Anderson's term, on a popular level in the historical moment spanning the ending of the colonial era in India and the establishment of independence? In so doing, I have attempted to suspend my preconceptions about modern Hinduism and to let the images reveal their deeper layers of meaning. I have extended Anderson's concept of nation as "imagined community", imagined through the simultaneous mass consumption of popular printed-word media such as newspapers, to embrace the mass consumption of vernacular images, specifically, mechanically-reproduced goddess images.

I have proposed that much of the controversy and debate around the meaning of "Hinduism" is the result of a conversation by participants who think in very different terms – not simply Western/European/Christian and Asian/Indian/Hindu, but religious and quantitative/categorical terms. I have suggested that the post-Enlightenment European penchant for scientific classification and categorization, when applied to indigenous Indian forms of religion and art, has not often produced a good fit between the system of classification and its material. I suggest that the lack of fit in this system can be at least partly compensated by the approach used in the phenomenology of religion, which understands phenomena as manifestations of a deep structure. In the case of modern Hinduism, the structure includes both a vast body of culturally resonant symbols, images and myths, which Romila Thapar calls "civilizational symbols" (Thapar 1992),

and theological assumptions about the goddess as a divine "ground of being" or ultimate reality coextensive with *shakti* (power) and *dharma* ("that which upholds", righteousness.)

I have attempted to show that the intersection, at this moment in time, of two very different consciousnesses, which we may call for convenience Euro-enlightenment and Hindu-mythological, produced examples of religion and art which, informed by both, yield a third mode of being- in- the- world. Evidence of this meeting of consciousnesses and of its artistic expression is graphically depicted in the "god-picture" genre, representing as it does the marriage of European concepts of aesthetics and form with Indian concepts of *rasa* and the transformational nature of devotional representation. The art produced by this "marriage" is irreducible to the sum of its parts. This artistic genre turns Walter Benjamin's thinking about religious "aura" and mechanical reproduction on its head by dramatizing the connection in Hindu consciousness between multiplicity and power, in which a deity's multiplication renders him or her *more* powerful and *more* accessible to devotees. Moreover, the images themselves are simultaneously realistic in the Western artistic sense and Hindu in their mythological and theological content. With regard to this genre, art historian Christopher Pinney posed the question "What do these pictures *do*?" from a historical/nationalist perspective. Addressing that question from a religious studies perspective, I say that one of the things these pictures do is to create a space in which the Euro-enlightenment rationalism and Hindu-mythologica perspectives are held in a creative tension which allows them to meld in the viewer's consciousness to form a religious entity which can be reduced neither to pre-colonial forms of Hinduism

nor a “colonial construction,” but a can only be described by a third term, modern Hinduism, or *sanatana dharma* in the inclusive, Gandhian sense.

**Modern Hinduism and mytho-pictures as religious “creole” forms**

I suggest that this modern Hinduism can be understood as a sort of religious “creole”. In linguistics, a creole language is one which forms when speakers of two distinct and mutually unintelligible languages are required to communicate, typically for commercial purposes. The initial form of communication between two such groups is called a “pidgin.” By definition, a pidgin has no native speakers, and its vocabulary and grammatical structure are crude. However, once the original speakers teach it to a new generation, for whom it is their native language, it is no longer considered a pidgin, but a new language, a creole, containing elements of both parent languages but reducible to the parts of neither; at this stage, the language will begin to develop new idioms and grammatical forms comprehensible to its native speakers though perhaps not always to the original pidgin-speakers. (Joyner 1985) In Hinduism’s case, some of the adaptations of worship made by nineteenth-century reformers such as the Arya Samaj (congregational singing, sermons) and the reformist urge to develop a conceptual framework reinventing India’s family of Vedic-based religious practices as a single “religion” may be understood as part of modern Hinduism’s “pidgin” phase. Today, those innovations, though originally inspired by European/Christian pratice, are standard in Hindu practice, and their European origins are largely ignored or forgotten. Additional “creole” adaptations of the Western Christian idiom are, of course, the very term

"Hinduism", now claimed by millions of Hindus worldwide, and the artistic genre we have been discussing.

As we have noted, that genre of "mytho-pictures" borrowed idioms from European painting such as the use of perspective, variety of color, realistic figure modelling, and the 'life-like' depiction of people and scenes (Guha-Thakurta 1992:96), as distinct from the conventions of indigenous painting. Some images bore an obvious debt to European religious art, as evidenced by the halo and swaddling clothes of baby Krishna in the image below, circa 1910:



**Figure 44 Krishna rescued from slaughter, lithograph, 1910s**

Still disparaged by many art critics as “kitsch”, a “pidgin” art if you will, this genre of Indian religious art has nevertheless established itself as something which is neither classical European painting nor Indian folk-art, but a third thing which combines elements of both “parent” genres in unique ways. It is the visual evidence for cultural and religious abutment, conflict, and the successful attempt to communicate across very different cultural and religious lines.

## Further study

The phenomenological investigation of goddess pictures which I have undertaken in this project has shed light on the process by which modern Hinduism religious identity was envisioned in terms of *dharma*. We saw that a position on image worship, pro or con, was central to the issue of being a “real Hindu” in modern terms. We saw how images of the cosmic and maternal cow referenced *dharma* and the need to protect it, a theme which recurs in the images of Durga conquering the buffao demon. We also saw that the pictures drew homologies between the earth, the subcontinent, the Hindu community, and the body of the goddess as nurturing, maternal, and inclusive. At the same time, the pictures point to a deeply gendered and deeply inclusive substructure for modern Hinduism, which bears further investigation.

The examination of these images led us to consider Bharat Mata, “Mother India,” a modern goddess whose iconography clearly shares characteristics with mother/warrior goddess traditions of the past. Although she is on a continuum with the great goddesses Durga/Kali, Sarasvati and Lakshmi, Bharat Mata evolved from a literary tradition which stressed the need for Mother India’s “sons” to come to her aid in the face of colonial

exploitation, and she was taken up by the nationalist movement as a religio-political symbol of a unified nation. That nation, though conceived us by Gandhi and his followers as coextensive, or at least compatible, with *sanata dharma* and with traditional formulations of India as the goddess' body, was re-imagined as a *secular* nation.

Arvind Sharma notes:

> The fact that the British had defeated both the Hindus and the Muslims and now ruled over both could have created an interesting consequence – uniting the two communities in a common cause against the British/Christian enemy. The mutiny against the British in 1857 – 1858 and the Gandhian movement in its early phase raised such hopes, but they were never realized, for the country was partitioned along religious lines in 1947. (Sharma 1993:51)

Even before Partition was accomplished, Gandhi was assassinated by a fellow Hindu who mistrusted Gandhi's commitment to the Muslim community. Partition resulted not only in the splitting of Mother India's body but in devastating communal violence and mistrust, and led to a Hinduism which, though ideologically universalist, has become increasingly militant. In contemporary India, conceived as a religiously secular, though Hindu-predominant, nation, Bharat Mata has increasingly taken on the status of a corporate goddess, not the mother of a religiously inclusive community.

In this project, I have suggested that, by understanding the genealogy of goddess images in *religious* terms, we open new avenues to understanding how Hindus in the period spanning the end of colonialism and the beginning of independence envisioned India's ancient religious traditions into a modern Hindu communal identity. Although I have attempted to shift the focus of the discourse on mechanically reproduced "god pictures" from a primarily sociopolitical one to a religious one, in considering Bharat Mata, we seem to arrive at a figure who differs from the classic pantheon of goddess as earth, mother, and warrior. Her religious genealogy is readily subsumed by sociopolitical

concerns. Her images seem to lack the transformative quality so important to Hindu devotional art, and her mythology, grounded as it is in the trope of the mother's degradation and need for rescue, has not translated well to an independent India.

Before Independence, under colonial rule, both nationalists and Hindu reformers could conceive of India as holy ground, *Bhumidevi* or *Bharatvarsha*. Despite its Hindu majority, independent India is a secular nation. Gandhi wanted India to be a secular state on religious grounds: he held all religions to be equally valid. In terms of our images, in a Gandhian India, all communities are equally deserving of mother cow's milk. Nehru was committed to Hinduism on cultural, but not religious grounds. In his words:

> I am proud of this noble heritage which was and still is ours, and I am aware that I too, like all of us, am a link in that uninterrupted chain which finds its origin in the dawn of history, in India's immemorial past. It is in testimony of this and as a last homage to the cultural heritage of India that I request that a handful of my ashes be thrown in the Ganga at Allahabad (formerly known as Prayag) so that they may be borne to the vast ocean that bears on the shores of India. (Renou 1968: 128)

Nevertheless, he saw religion as a reactionary force from which the modern state should dissociate itself. Ironically, the secular Indian state has had to take charge of Hindu affairs at the national level, because Hinduism has no central "church" or religious organization.

As the personification of an independent India, Bharat Mata, notwithstanding her kinship with Durga/Kali, Lakshmi and Sarasvati, is something of an anomaly when it comes to devotional practice. As we have seen, India is rich with goddess temples, many identified as *tirthas* where Sati's body parts fell to earth; goddess worship, both public and private, is a major strand of Hindu religiosity. Santoshi Ma, born like Bharat Mata from literary and artistic works, has been homologized to "great tradition" goddesses by

various websites; numerous temples are dedicated to her, and she has a burgeoning home-worship community as a well as an internet presence.

The question arises, what makes Bharat Mata different from all other goddesses? We have seen that the ubiquity and availability of goddess pictures lends itself, in many cases – most dramatically, that of Adya Ma Shakti – to a democratization and ease of worship, with individual devotees encouraged to act as their own *pujaris* and even to make personal use of the implements of ritual.  What differentiates Bharat Mata from Durga/Kali, when they share so many iconographic similarities? When Durga's autumn festival is, in effect, a pan-Indian celebration involving all communities, why is there so little evidence of a devotional cult to Bharat Mata?  When the goddess of the *Devi Mahatmya* is an autonomous agent whose sovereignty encompasses the universe, why has Bharat Mata's sphere shrunk to a parochial concern for Hindus at the expense of other religious communities?

A study of the existing Bharat Mata temples might shed light on such questions. As we have noted, there are only two major temples in India dedicated to Bharat Mata, one in Varanasi, the other in Haridwar.  One or two others were proposed, but never built: the foundation stone for one was laid in Madras in 1923, but the chief organizer died before it could be built (Ramaswamy 2010).  An internet search for "Bharat Mata mandir" yields only two other hits.  One is a Wikimapia aerial view of a building identified as the Bharat Mata Mandir in Jhansi, accompanied by the information that "This temple was built by the residents of Deen Dayal Nagar.  A place where all the religious ceremonies and cultural activies take place." (http://wikimapia.org/Bharat-Mata-Mandir-Temple)  The other, from the tourist website

http://www.indianholiday.com/discover-india/feb-04/history-chequered-past.html, mentions a Bharat Mata temple at Daulatabad Fort in Maharashtra, built on the site of a former mosque, built on the site of a former Jain temple.  The copy reads:

> Built in 1218 largely from pre-existing temple columns and beams, the spacious prayer hall is entered through four main arched portals, with a large adjoining courtyard…A single large dome encloses the space fronting the mihrab or prayer niche, which now holds an image of Bharat Mata as the mosque had long since ceased to function as a place of worship.  Temple columns, a mosque layout, and an image of Mother India make this quiet monument a curious mosaic of India's multilayered history.

The site does not say when the Bharat Mata temple preempted the mosque, what sort of worship is conducted there, or whether there have been any complaints from the local Muslim community.

The Varanasi temple, dedicated in 1936 by Gandhi, contains the image of no deity but rather an enormous relief map of an undivided subcontinent showing rivers, mountains, and pilgrimage sites. This image emphasizes the body of India as the goddess' body and the home of all living beings. (http://www.varanasicity.com/temples/bharatmata-mandir.html)  The temple is open to all visitors. It seems to have no regular worship services, but in the photograph below we can see that someone has placed marigolds at the image's "feet", as one would do with an anthropomorphic deity statue (*murti)*:



**Figure 45 Map as murti, Bharat Mata temple, Varanasi**

In 1983 the Vishva Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council) dedicated an eight-story temple in Haridwar to Bharat Mata. It, too, features a relief map of India, but also a statue, identified as Bharat Mata. An article in the feminist journal *Manushi* reports:

> Unlike its Benares predecessor, this temple contains an anthropomorphic statue of its deity. Here, Bharat Mata holds a milk urn in one hand and sheaves of grain in the other, and is accordingly described in the temple guide book as "signifying the white and green revolution that India needs for progress and prosperity." The guide book also tells us that, "The temple serves to promote the devotional attitude toward Bharat Mata, something that historians and mythological story tellers may have missed." (Sadan Jha, "The life and times of Bharat Mata," *Manushi*, August 2004,142)

This temple enshrines the memories of "bold and gallant sons and daughters of Bharat Mata, who sacrificed their lives for the patriotic cause of protecting the Sanatana

Dharma and the glory of the Motherland" (Hawley, 272): these include Mahatma Gandhi and Subhas Chandra Bose, as representatives of nonviolence and militarism, respectively, as well as other martial heros and heroines. Although not every "hero" represented in this temple is Hindu, decriptions of the temple suggest that, despite the official position about a "devotional attitude", the overall impression is of a Hindu corporate structure coopting, rather than embracing, other religions.

An investigation into the production and sale of Bharat Mata images for home use, as well as on-site visits to the two major temples, might shed light on her role in people's lived devotional practices as well as her trajectory from her conception as the nation embodied to the corporate symbol of a "secular" Hindu government. Jha's article mentions one such image, from a wall calendar produced by the rightwing organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, "National Patriotic Organization). It is worth quoting at length:

> In the central image, we see a woman occupying the map of the nation, giving the nation as a body a very tangible female form. We have here an image which takes its meanings from a wide range of cultural signifiers: the smiling face of the goddess standing in front of her lion, looking directly into the gaze of onlookers. In the second subtext [a quotation attributed to a certain Swami Ramtirth], however, the body of the nation has been defined in a very systematic and anatomical fashion. The cultural signifiers of the visual image have been provided with a set of concrete meanings and contexts. The quotation says:
>
> I am India. The Indian nation is my body. Kanyakumari is my foot and the Himalayas my head. The Ganges flow [sic] from my thighs. My left leg is the Coromandel Coast, my right is the Coast of Malabar. I am this entire land. East and West are my arms. How wondrous is my form! When I walk, I sense all India moves with me. When I speak, India speaks with me. I am India. I am Truth, I am God, I am Beauty. (Jha, *Manushi* 2004: 142)

Below the image and the quotation appear an announcement of a speaking engagement by Rajju Bhaiya (deceased July 2003), fourth head of the RSS. The

calendar, which appears on first glance to be classic devotional image, is in fact performing other work. Jha notes that, in the original Hindi, the subtext from Swami Ramtirth switches gender. From "I am India…" to "How wondrous is my form!" the language is grammatically feminine, leading us to identify the body of the nation as female. However, the statements following "When I walk…all India moves with me" are grammatically masculine, calling into question just who is speaking – Bharat Mata? Swami Ramtirth? Rajju Bhaiya? The conflation of the goddess' body with the geographic country (referred to, however, in the text as *Bharatvarsha*, an explicitly Hindu-religious reference) and the gender-switching of the printed text create the impression that Rajju Bhaiya is coextensive with Bharat Mata, which is to say, the Hindu-partisan RSS *is* India, is God, is truth. The equation of the goddess' body to the subcontinent, with its mountains and rivers, recalls the image of the cosmic cow whose body also contained mountains, rivers, and natural features as well as deities. However, where the cosmic cow was explicitly a nurturing mother to people of all religious communities, the RSS' Bharat Mata calendar image seems to have a different agenda, that of privileging one group to the erasure of others.

**Colonial construction and Hindu dharma**

Our phenomenological investigation of goddess images, Bharat Mata's included, has revealed a deep structure in modern Hinduism which imagines Hindu religious communal identity in inclusive terms. In Bharat Mata images such as the RSS calendar that inclusiveness borders on hegemony, while the earlier images are far more universal, evincing a concern for the agency of all members of the community. What do these

images tell us about Hindu religious identity? How has the imagination of a Hindu religious community changed since Independence, and since Partition? Can the academic study of Hinduism help to "rescue" the inclusive vision which informed that imagination before those events?

Some scholars (Von Stietencron, King) claim that the colonial (Western) construction of Hinduism involved dragging together under one umbrella a number of discrete phenomena which did not belong together and classifying it as a religion. From this point of view, there is no such thing in precolonial India as Hinduism, only a number of unrelated and distinct sects. I have shown that, at least in certain cases, the visual evidence helps to problematize this point of view. Other scholars (Sharma, Lipner, Doniger) make a claim for understanding and talking about Hinduism in terms of *dharma* and claim that the "family" of indigenous practices and beliefs which trace their roots to Vedic religion constitute branches of that "ancient banyan," *sanatana dharma*. The vision of Hinduism as *sanatana dharma*, a fluid and inclusive religiosity with a proven ability to adapt to historical contingencies, informed the thinking of such leaders as Mahatma Gandhi, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (forrmer president of India), Sarojini Naidu (poet, freedom fighter, and first Indian woman president of the Indian National Congress) in their efforts towards social and personal transformation. At the present time, when the Indian subcontinent is partitioned along religious lines, her inhabitants are plagued by communal violence, and the concept of *santana dharma* has been coopted by Hindu chauvinist groups, a widescale academic re-visioning of Hindu *dharma* in terms of its inclusive deep structure might be a step towards healing some of the political-communal rifts.

In *The Discovery of India*, written by Jawaharlal Nehru while he was imprisoned in Ahmadnagar Fort, he shares this narrative of Bharat Mata, as he shared it with audiences in pre-Independence, pre-Partition Indian villages:

> Often as I wandered from meeting to meeting I spoke to my audience of this India of ours, of Hindustan and of Bharata, the old Sanskrit name derived from the mythical founder…I tried to make them think of India as a whole, and even to some little extent of this wide world of which we were a part…Sometimes as I reached a gathering, a great roar of welcome would greet me: *Bharat Mata ki Jai* – Victory to Mother India! I would ask them unexpectedly what they meant by that cry, who was this *Bharat Mata*…whose victory they wanted? My question would amuse them and surprise them…At least [someone] would say that it was the *dharti*, the good earth of India, that they meant. What earth? Their particular village patch, or..the district or province, or..the whole of India?…I would…explain that…what counted ultimately were the people of India, people like them and me…*Bharat Mata*… was essentially these millions of people, and victory to her meant victory to these people. You are parts of this *Bharat Mata*, I told them, you are in a manner yourselves *Bharat Mata*, and as this idea slowly soaked into their brains, their eyes would light up as if they had made a great discovery. (Nehru 1960/1946: 29-30)

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